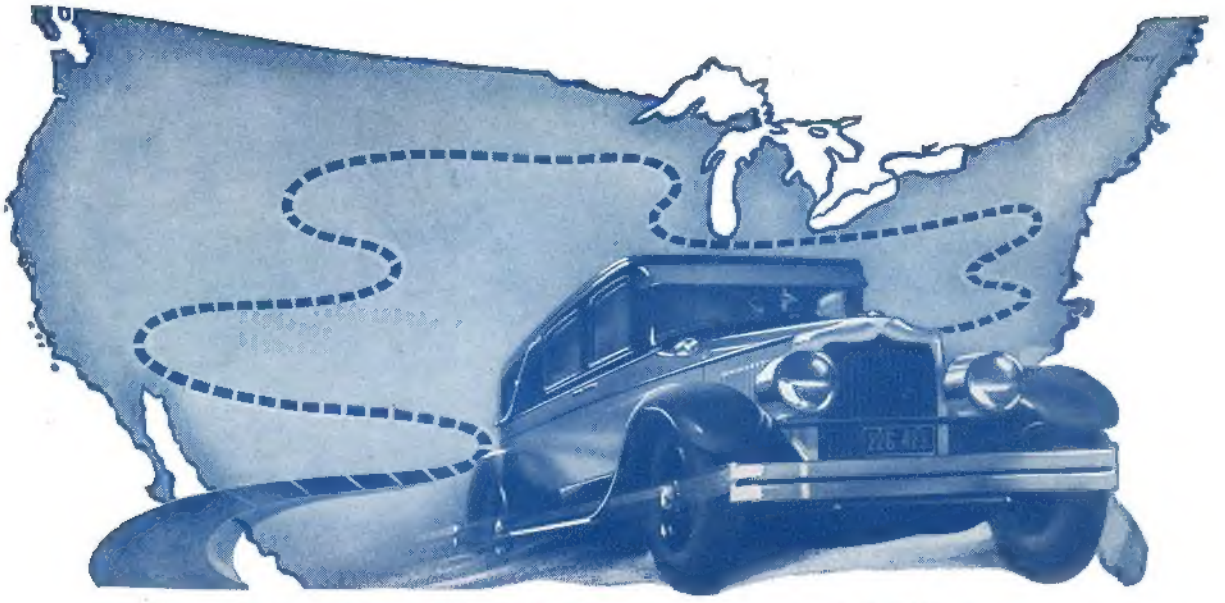
Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine



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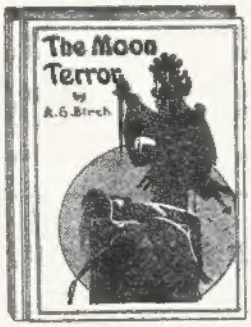
IF you had received thousands of letters requesting you to reprint a certain story which was too long to be republished in the magazine, what would you do? THE MOON TERROR, by A. G. Birch, which appeared as a serial in WEIRD TALES in 1923, is too long to republish in our magazine consistent with our policy. As a matter of service to the multitude of readers who have requested us to reprint this story, we have had it printed in cloth-bound book form to sell at the publishers' price of $1.50 per copy. This fascinating book will be sent to you direct; we pay the postage.



Tremendously Popular

THE MOON TERROR was such a thrilling story that the entire reserve stock of the issue containing the first part was sold out on special orders to those who were not fortunate enough to start the story from the beginning, but began to read it with the second installment. It narrates the sensational attempt of a group of Chinese scientists to obtain rulership of the world by a tremendous threat against the very existence of the earth. The diabolical methods by which they put their scheme into execution, the frantic race across the ocean to circumvent them, the weird and exciting adventures that befell, make one of the most gripping and fascinating novels ever written.

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Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The SCOURGE of B'MOTH

By Bertram Russell.

"Around him there curled a thin wisp of yellow vapor."

1. The Fog

THE first inkling that I had of the gigantic abomination that was soon to smother the world with its saprophytic obscenity was obtained almost by accident.

My friend Dr. Prendergast, a gentleman eminent in his own particular branch of medicine, which included all sorts of brain specializations, operations, trephining, and so on, called me personally by telephone from his own residence late one night.

It struck me as surprizing that he should not have had his secretary or nurse call me during office hours. I was not in error when I thought his mission an urgent one.

"Randall," he said to me, "I've never seen the like of this in all my years of experience, and I am pretty sure you never did in yours either."

"A mental case?" I asked with quickening interest.

"Yes. And more. It's got me almost beaten to a standstill. I confess I'm pretty nearly stumped. I've gone over him thoroughly—X-rayed him and so on—but still I can't find any evidence whatever of organic disturbance."

"Well—can't it be a functional neurosis?" I asked in some surprize.

"If it is, I never saw another like it. The fellow seems to be actually *possessed*. He acts without knowing why he does so. I've given him a rough psycho-analysis, but it reveals nothing more than the repressions and inhibitions that every average person has. His unconscious contents show absolute ignorance of the awful obsession by which his waking hours are beset."

"There must be a reason for it," I

said. "If a man has an obsession, there are unconscious associations to exorcise it with. It can only be the symbol for something else——"

"The symbol for something else. You're right there. But if I can't find out what this something else really is, and pretty soon at that, this patient is going to join his Master before long."

"His Master?" I queried, surprized at what I thought to be a Biblical allusion by Prendergast.

"Yes. Whoever that is. He talks about nothing else. This Master represents the thing that is dominating him, stretching out its slimy tentacles from the darkest depths of unfathomable abysses to strangle the desire to live within him. He says now that he is eager to die, and you don't need me to tell you what that means in the neurotic."

"I'll come over immediately," I said.

"German-American Hospital, ward 3, psychiatric," he said, giving me the final instructions.

I HURRIEDLY donned my clothes—I had been reading Goethe in a dressing-gown before retiring — and unlocking the garage, I started the coupé. Soon I was on my way to the hospital where my friend had arranged to meet me.

The night was exceptionally dark, and a thin, clammy drizzle had commenced to fall—not a cold rain, but a viscid, penetrating dankness like the breath of some Stygian fury. The car was quite closed, yet I felt the clammy thrill of it inside. I even noticed that the instrument board was covered with drops of fluid and the wheel became wet and unruly under my touch. I almost allowed it to slip out of my hands as the car rounded a sharp curve. I jammed the brakes on. The wheels skidded on the slithery ground. I had been just in time to prevent the coupé from careening over the edge, where a dark abyss fell away from the road as if a giant had scooped a track through the heart of the hills.

A cold perspiration broke out all over me. I could hardly drive. My hair tingled at the roots. For it had seemed to me at that moment that *hands other than my own had wrenched that wheel from mine in a demonic lust of murderous intent.* Try as I would, I could not throw off the hideous thought that a nameless fetidity had me in its control at that moment, and was even now within the car bent upon my destruction.

Was I, a psychiatrist of years' standing, versed in all the processes that produce madness in the human brain, skilled in treatment of those within its devouring maw—was I falling headlong, powerless to help myself, into the awful depths of lunacy? I fought the very suggestion, but to little avail. The dark night, the wild and mountainous nature of the country (where the hospital had been erected for the sake of quietness and seclusion) combined to produce a feeling of unknown forces, malignant in their fury toward man and the sons of man, that I could not dismiss.

But more than all was the nauseating, overpowering effect of that clammy fog, like a breath of evil, that rode with me, enveloping me in its chill blast. I laughed aloud at the notion of a presence other than my own in the car, and the laugh, muffled by the turgid breath that surrounded me, echoed in weird accents from the rear of the car. My voice had sounded strange, like the insincere laugh of an actor who is not interested in his rôle. I even turned to the rear of the coupé, as if expecting to see the presence there, but my darting eyes revealed nothing.

"This madness must cease," I told myself, as I turned on the electric warmer inside the car. It may have been the comforting heat that this produced, or it may have been an unconscious assurance that the laws of nature still continued to function—

my turning the switch had proved this—I did not know what was the true cause, but as the heat within the car increased, my spirits warmed, too, and I found myself driving with my accustomed care, and utterly without the meaningless fears that had overwhelmed me so few minutes ago, but so many ages since, as it seemed to me then.

The air inside the car was clear now: the drops of moisture had disappeared from the instrument board, and my hand grasped the steering-wheel with its accustomed firmness. But it was becoming uncomfortably hot. Still, I hesitated to switch off the heater, arrested by I know not what unknown fear. It may have been a warning from that Great Unknown that we are now only dimly beginning to understand. I can not say. But, at last, I switched off the heater.

As the air cooled, my spirits cooled, too. I felt the same senseless dread stealing over me, and I watched with intense anxiety for the reappearance of those drops of moisture on the dashboard. Seeming to materialize from nothingness they came.

The air within the car thickened, and again caressed me with its voluptuous and sickly folds. As the lights of the hospital appeared upon the crest of a ridge ahead of me, I began to tell myself that I *had* to turn on the heater once more. But my will was not equal to the act. I drove on in a kind of dream, blithely careless of anything in the world. The steering-wheel responded easily to my touch; it even seemed to spring from under my hand as I swerved around treacherous corners where chasms thousands of feet deep yawned below, missing the edge by a scant few inches.

I drove on heedless, in the dense opacity. I could see nothing now. But the wheel seemed to have a magic of its own. I felt the car bumping and undulating like a roller coaster. My head crashed against the roof. The springs bent with an ominous crack. I felt the wheels slithering sideways as though someone were pulling them from their course, and finally, with a terrific crash, the coupé turned over and would have capsized completely if the pillars that marked the entrance to the hospital had not partly prevented it from falling.

Dr. Prendergast and two of his associates opened the door and dragged me out, half dazed, into the night.

"What's wrong, Randall?" said Prendergast anxiously.

I stood there, stupidly, hardly knowing what answer to make.

"We've been watching you for some time. We saw your lights five miles away. You've been driving like a man in a dream. Look — you've ruined half the flower beds in the hospital grounds."

I turned, and saw the tracks of the car cut deep into the lawns and flower beds before me. I had left the driveway and traveled across the hills and valleys of the landscape garden. A chill dread came over me. I could see the tracks of the car clear out into the road beyond. I could even see the headlights of another car traveling along the same road that I had come —miles away. In the soft air there was no moisture; above, the stars twinkled along their age-old courses. The fog had lifted!

With a new fear clutching at my heart's vitals, I spoke to them.

"The fog—the rain—it made it impossible for me to see. I couldn't find the road half of the time. I never saw such a night!"

"Fog? Rain? There's been no fog and no rain. Why, we could see your headlights for miles. The night is as clear as a crystal."

"But there *was* fog, right up to a minute ago. The car was wet with it, I tell you."

As I spoke, I reached my hand to the windshield, intending to prove my assertion. In amazement, I looked at it. There was no trace of moisture—

none at all! I stooped to the grass, and buried my hand in it. There was no rain upon it. It was even a little dried up, and I could see it had not been watered for some time. Again I pierced the night. There was not a cloud in the air anywhere, not a bank of fog between the hospital and the city.

"What you need is a stimulant. Come inside, and I'll give you one," said Dr. Prendergast, taking me cautiously by the arm.

Fearful for my own sanity, I stumblingly entered the hospital. As I took one last look around, I thought I saw a thin whisp of sickly vapor curling around the green lawn before me, like a wraith of yellow venom, and while my distraught nerves tingled in every fiber, there came to me the muffled echo of a mocking laugh.

Half walking, half sliding, I was taken into the hospital.

2. The Call of B'Moth

"FEEL better?" asked Dr. Prendergast, when I had gulped the stimulant that he had handed to me.

In the cheerful air of the doctor's private office I felt my fears to be of the flimsiest. I even felt constrained to laugh aloud at them. But the memory of that ride was not so easily effaced. However, I made light of my experience, saying that I had had but little sleep, and night-driving did not agree with me. Dr. Prendergast gave me a curious look from his slanted eyes, but said nothing.

We left the office, and taking the elevator, were soon in ward 3—the ward where the mental cases were confined. A nurse met us with a chart in her hands.

"How is the patient?" asked my colleague, with more than usual interest.

"Still delirious, Doctor," answered the trim little nurse.

"We shall take a look at him," he remarked, walking toward a cot in a far corner of the room. "There he is," he added, to me.

Before us lay a pallid-looking figure. His black hair was tousled, as though he had been tearing at it with his fingers. His eyes were surrounded by deep, hollow circles that made him look like a grim precursor of death itself. He was talking inarticulately, and holding a disjointed conversation with some imaginary creature that he alone saw.

As I sat beside him, he burst into a frenzied laugh. Lifting his emaciated hand toward me, he pointed a skinny finger into my face.

"Ha! ha! Here's another one to rob the Master. You came too late—the Master saw to that. Ha! ha!"

"Quiet yourself," said Dr. Prendergast in a soothing voice. "You are going to get well, but you must not excite yourself in this fashion."

"Going to get well? Oh no, I'm not! The Master saw to that. I'm going soon, very soon. I'm going to join the Master. Deep down—where he waits for the faithful. That's where I'm going. Why should I want to live? Why should I wait around when there is work to be done?"

"What sort of work?" I inquired, hoping to relieve the compression within him by allowing him to talk.

"The work of the jungle. The work of the deep. That's what must be done. The time approaches. Millions and millions will help. And I shall soon be there. Ha! ha! You came too late. The Master saw to that. On the storm he rides. His breath is the breath of the fog. In the rain, he comes to the earth. He stayed you tonight. Eh? Didn't he?"

In spite of myself, I was troubled. Who was this Master who rode on the wings of the storm, and whose breath was the fog? I asked myself how this lunatic in his ravings knew of my experience that night. He was gasping for breath. His efforts had exerted him unduly, and apparently he was about to expire.

The nurse brought a glass of water, which he gulped greedily. "Water," he said. "Oceans of it. That's what the Master likes. That's the way to reach him. Into the caves where the blue light flames it goes, down, down beneath the bodies of dead men, deep —deep. The Master! Ah! B'Moth! Master—I come!"

His head fell back upon the pillow, and with a rapt expression in his eyes he died. I stood perplexed. This could be no ordinary case of hallucination. The man had seemed, as Dr. Prendergast said, bewitched, possessed. I left the cot, in company with my friend.

Suddenly he clutched my arm feverishly. "Look," he cried. "*Look!*"

I turned in the direction in which he was pointing. The glass of water was still clutched in the patient's hand. The fluid glowed with a lambent bluish radiance. It flittered across the features of the dead man, which became greenish under its influence. His lips twisted into a snarl under the light, and the sharp fangs of his long canine teeth pricked through his closed mouth.

And the water in the glass was bubbling — bubbling as though it boiled; and there before my eyes the fluid slowly fell, until the glass was empty of all save the bluish glow that surrounded it, and not only it, but the bed, the linen, the dead man, and *ourselves!*

3. The Unknown

THE pressure of my professional duties served to drive the matter from my attention for several days, but it was rudely brought to my mind in a manner as strange as can well be conceived.

I had been carelessly scanning the newspaper, when my eyes were arrested and riveted by a small and apparently unimportant notice that was sandwiched in between the account of a big alimony case and the raid upon some bootleggers. Had the editor known the full import of his copy, he would have blazoned the thing in block type, and put out a special edition of his sheet. But he did not, any more than did I myself at that time, suspect that soon there was to arise from the deeps a menace whose cancerous sores were destined to spread their purulent way into the very heart of civilization itself. I quote the notice verbatim:

ARICA, PERU, May 8—A strange case was brought to the attention of police here today. Alonzo Sigardus, a negro of West Indian extraction, was haled before Justice Cordero on a charge of attempted suicide. He was seen to dive into the ocean near Point Locasta by Captain Jenks, the lookout at the Marine Exchange station there.

Jenks says he rushed to the assistance of the man, thinking he had intended to go swimming and did not know of the treacherous undertow at the point. When he arrived, however, he saw at a glance that it was a case of attempted suicide, for Sigardus could not swim, and was merely floundering around helplessly in the depths.

Captain Jenks promptly dived into the water at the place known to sightseers as Devil's Cauldron, and after a frantic struggle with the maelstrom, during which the negro did his best to drown the two of them, was able to rescue the man.

Instead of thanks, however, Sigardus struck Jenks brutally upon the face, crying: "The curse of B'Moth upon you! It was the call of the Master. What right have you to interfere? I went to join B'Moth, and now you have dragged me back again. When the time comes, you shall suffer."

The incident has aroused widespread local interest, because it is said that the Devil's Cauldron upon foggy days is the meeting-place of spirits of the deep. Legend has it that upon such days, and during the rainy season, the Monster of the Pool arises from the deep water to claim his own.

Obviously, the distorted mind of the superstitious negro thought he had been called by the spirit of the Cauldron. It is interesting to note that a thick haze commenced to overcloud the pool after Sigardus had been rescued. Until this time, the sun had been shining with great brilliance.

There is much excitement among the native population here, and talk is common that the rescue bodes no good for the white man. Serious disturbances have arisen in several inland villages, and police and military have united forces to protect the white population against whom the attacks seem chiefly to have been directed.

Apparently, the incident had only obtained recognition in the press because of the legends which were connected with the Devil's Cauldron, and which were thought to be of interest to the outside world; and because of the attempted uprisings against the white people. But to me, the insertion of that single and apparently incomplete word gave a sinister and terrible inflection to the whole paragraph.

Who, or what, was B'Moth? It must be the same "Master" to whom the dying man had appealed in the German-American Hospital. And there was no shadow of doubt that it was a duplication of the same occurrence, unconnected with it except by the subtle influence of the B'Moth.

I felt my hair begin to tingle when I read the news item again and came to note about the fog that overlay the pool after the negro had uttered his curse. This was too close a similarity to admit of any such explanation as mere coincidence. As a psychiatrist it interested me greatly, and I even began to feel in some obscure way that it was my duty to investigate the whole business. Perhaps (and far-fetched as the idea may seem, I thought of it in all seriousness)—perhaps the very sanity of the world was at stake.

As I laid the paper aside and prepared to drive to my office, I felt again the oppressive weight of that unspeakable thing that I was slowly coming to dread, so that I could not drive alone in fog or through a rainstorm (though I dared tell no one of this phobia) I felt—Good God, how I felt!—the weight of that slimy pollution. I seemed to be drawn unresistingly into the slavering maw of this foul corruption from hell. I stood transfixed, my teeth chattering, unable to lift a hand, watching the place where I felt absolutely certain the thing was. And then into my jangled consciousness came the imperative ringing of the telephone bell.

I moved slowly toward the instrument, my eyes fixed irresistibly upon the other side of the room. Mechanically I lifted the receiver.

A voice came as though from a great distance. "Is that Dr. Randall? Please come across to the German-American Hospital immediately. Dr. Prendergast has gone insane!"

4. Madness

When I arrived at the hospital where my friend was being treated, the condition of my mind was far from equable. That the same calamity which I dreaded had actually befallen my friend came as no slight shock. But I resolutely strove to compose myself as I entered the building. If my suspicions were correct, there was work to be done, hard work and plenty of it—if this foul thing was to be foiled in its malign purposes.

I found Dr. Prendergast in a comfortable private room—the best in the place. He was sleeping quietly when I entered. But before I had been there more than a few minutes, he awoke, and looking at me, shook hands cordially. He did not have the appearance of a lunatic at that time. He began to speak, in a natural, softly modulated voice.

"Randall, there's something strange and uncanny about this business. Ever since that affair when I had to call you into consultation, I have had an odd feeling that all is not well. I've actually been harassed by morbid phobias—if that's what they are. I never dreamed of a psychosis coming to me. The more I think about the matter, the more I have come to believe that you and I are marked out as martyrs to the cause, though why, or how, I can not even begin to understand."

"You seem all right now, and certainly you never gave me the impression of being neurotic."

"That's just it. I ought to be the very last person to lose his mind, but though I am as sane as it is possible

for a man to be at this time, in a few minutes that Thing may have me in its clutch, and I shall be a raving lunatic. It's funny, Randall, to be able to analyze your own particular form of lunacy—if such it is. I can remember quite well what happened to me last night. It is much more real than the usual dream associations. And I dread its return more profoundly because of this. If this is lunacy, it is a form never before seen. But I don't think it is lunacy at all."

"Tell me about it," I urged. "Perhaps two minds can do what one can not."

"There's not much to tell. I had been reading Freud until a late hour last night — his last book, you know. Thoughts that were assuredly not born of earth came to me. I began to feel an immense distaste for life—the life that we live today, I mean. I thought of the days of the jungle, and those primordial memories that lie dormant within every man came back to me. The artificiality of the world, with its commercial systems, its codes of conduct, its gigantic material things, that after all have done little else besides making life harder to live, and shorter—all these appeared as the flimsiest futility.

"It seemed to me that man was not made to live in this fashion. I thought that the giant primeval forest with its fierce combat of man against man and beast against beast was the fitting habitat of life. I thought of those monsters of the deep, glimpsed occasionally by passing vessels—huge beyond the conception of man. Once life had been lived altogether on a gigantic scale like that. I felt, I can't say just why, a deep kinship, an affinity with those bloated colossi of the sea—the carrion that feed upon the bodies of the dead. They seemed to me to represent the farthest step that could be taken in a retrogressive direction—back from civilization, you see—back from the painfully acquired things that we count so valuable.

"And—here is the strange part—it seemed to me that this thought did not come wholly from myself. It was almost as if something had whispered into my ear that foul abomination of regression. I felt that at the same moment, not I alone, but thousands and thousands, rather millions, were dreaming of the time when the cycle should have been completed. We always learned that things are cyclical, you know. Rome rose; was great; fell. So on with the other civilizations, all of them. So undoubtedly will be our own great civilization. It will be the mythical end of the world that seers have predicted for centuries. There will be no starry cataclysm, but a return of all life to the jungle.

"Competent authorities state that if something is not done to stop this approaching catastrophe, we shall be literally eaten alive by insects—ants, for instance. There seems to be plenty of scientific basis for this suggestion. But who has thought of the awful possibilities that may arise if those unknown creatures, bloated to foul enormity, shall in concerted array overrun the civilized world?"

"It's an awful thought, but there's no foundation for it," I said comfortingly; for even in his sane moments my friend seemed to evidence a wildness not quite normal.

"I'm not so sure that there's no basis for it. I've had a feeling, lately, that there is a tremendous movement under way that has as its sole object the overthrow of civilization and reestablishment of the life of the jungle.

"And here's what appears to be the reason for selecting us. We can exercise an enormous control over the minds of men; you agree? This unspeakable Thing has seized upon us, is trying to enmesh us in its filthy net, to enlist us in the cause, because with the influence that we can exert we should be enormously valuable. Do you follow? We are to be apostles of this rotten creed!"

"What an appalling idea! I'd rather be dead," I said with a shudder.

"Dead! Who knows what might happen to you then? You might join the Master——"

"You, too!" I cried.

A spasm of horrible fear crossed my friend's face as the full import of his words bore in upon him. His muscles were twisted in an agony of internal strife, as he fought the insidious influence that was striving to warp the straightness of that magnificent brain.

"They haven't got me yet, Randall. But they are after me! I'll fight them. I pray that my lucid intervals may be frequent enough to enable me to unravel this foul mystery. Good God!—I'm in a cold sweat all over. Tremors!"

I started across the room to the table, and pouring a glass of water, handed it to my friend.

He shuddered convulsively, and recoiled from it as from a living horror.

"Away!" he shouted. "Take that contagion away! It's after me! It's alive! I won't drink it. It means madness!"

With a frantic effort he dashed the glass and its contents upon the floor.

I stared at my friend, aghast. Suddenly a thought came to me—a recollection of that night when a certain glass of water had glowed with iridescent fire; when, through the baneful influence of the fog, my own mind had skirted the borderland of lunacy. I began to understand.

My colleague was calming himself again. Presently he spoke.

"It's going to be a fight for me," he said. "But I'll battle to the last gasp. Your part will be to watch, and, if possible, learn more of this awful Thing that menaces the sanity of the world. There must be some way to destroy it."

"How shall I start?" I muttered in puzzled bewilderment. I had only the slightest of clues to work upon. The newspaper cutting did little more than confirm what I already suspected.

"Your key is the word of the Master: 'B'Moth'. Don't forget—*B'Moth*. What it means, I can't say. But the word has been ringing in my ears for days. That's the Master—that's the name of this cankerous rottenness that you must destroy!"

5. *A Clue From the Past*

I LEFT the hospital in a daze. How was I to destroy this Thing? I was already half in its clutches. I could do little but flounder in the dark. If, as Dr. Prendergast and that dead man had asserted, there were millions of followers, they kept their doings secret. "B'Moth"—the word was like a voice from another world—without meaning.

I thought, and thought, in an agony of apprehension. I knew not where to turn for information. I spent hours in my library, greatly to the detriment of my practise. I exhausted most of the books of mythology and of anthropology, but still I could find nothing that seemed to have any bearing upon the matter.

One day, when I was going through an ancient volume of Kane's *Magic and the Black Arts*, bound with a heavy bronze clasp, and closed with lock and key, I came upon the following:

There be many who revere the Devourer, though few have seen the full stature of this great power. It is a vision fraught with eldritch horror, and much sought by wizards of early times. One, Johannes of Madgeburg, wise in the lore of the ages, hath met success greatly in his efforts. He asserteth that the Devourer liveth in the Deep, and is not to be reached by any means, yet he hath been able to feel his breath and know his will. The secret is in a vaporous effluvium. For the Devourer hath power to manifest himself where there is moisture. His breath is the fog and the rain. Wherefore, many do account water the elemental, and do worship it in divers ways.

This Johannes hath told in his book of medicine how he did conjure from a heavy vapor in his retorts the very Essence itself

upon occasion. The phosphorus light of dead things did swell into a great brightness and fill the chamber, and withal came the spirit of the Devourer. And Johannes hath learned that he liveth in the deepest Ocean, where he awaiteth only a time auspicious for his return to earth. Many there be who joyfully believe the time approacheth, yet Johannes saith that many centuries shall pass ere the Master returneth to claim his own.

Much astonishment hath one remark which he made produced. He saith that the Devourer is a familiar of every man and every woman. He liveth eternally in the Inner Man. He reacheth forth from the Deep, and the Inner Man doth hear. All-seeing is his eye, all-hearing his ear. None can destroy him, for he is intrinsic in all men. In times of evil and lust, of war and strife, of man against man, and brother against brother, the Devourer liveth lustily in men. His ways are the ways of the Deep. There be saints and mystics who believe they have exorcised the Devourer, but in them, also, he liveth. In the deeps of the waters, and in the souls of men, he sleepeth, and one day will awaken to take his own.

I finished the ancient manuscript with a start. Though the Thing was called by another name, I could not doubt that the reference was to the same. I sought eagerly for the book of medicine that had been written by Johannes of Madgeburg, and after hunting all day I at last unearthed a copy in an antique shop. It was torn, and badly discolored, the writing in Latin, and in many places hard to decipher, but I found something of great interest to me.

Johannes, after describing his attempts to communicate with the Devourer, told of his success. He had learned the secret from a philosopher of a still earlier day, a day so far buried in antiquity that it preceded our own era by centuries. I quote, translating as well as I am able:

Being of a mind to discover the Ultimate, I sought diligently into the works of historians, and wise men of all ages. In my studies, I chanced upon a manuscript written by one, Joachim of Cannes. He had gathered a wealth of lore from men of every clime. He said the name of the Devourer was Behemoth, which, indeed, is translated into "he who devours the souls of men." This monster is of great antiquity, and was well perceived by the ancients.

In the Hebrew Bible, he is mentioned countless times. The seer Job makes much in speaking of him. All men are agreed that his size is as great beyond a man's as a man is great beyond the stature of a toad. He has power to reproduce for ever, and after the flood times he was driven into the ocean, where he lives among the dead in the caves of crawling things.

But the power of his thoughts is over all men. He has divers powers of manifestation. Through water, and through mist, is he felt, and his thoughts are the thoughts of the toad and the snake, wherefore these reptiles are accounted sacred by many. There is but one spell that can be cast to conjure him back to the ocean, and the parts of it . . .

I dropped the manuscript with disappointment. In my extremity I was prepared to work any spell, if it would, as Johannes said, be successful in exorcising this dread Thing. And the careless handling of the ages had torn from the manuscript the very page where the spell was formulated.

But now at least I had a clue to the Thing. I snatched up an apocryphal Bible, and read avidly all the references to the Behemoth in the Old Testament. There were many, but they were all agreed upon the devouring quality of the destroyer, and all affirmed that he would some day return from the depths to claim his own.

Winslow's encyclopedia, which I consulted last, placed as a footnote to an earlier article a paragraph stating that in many countries an organized worship of the Behemoth was practised under various disguises, and that the cult was more prevalent near the equator, and among savage races. The learned historian suggested that the animal might be a hippopotamus!

How little did he know of the power about which he wrote! But I gleaned from this short note another interesting fact. As I reflected upon it, it seemed a very natural corollary of the proposition. The worship was more prevalent in tropical countries, and among the lower races of humanity. The reason was obvious: they were nearer the jungle, both physically and

mentally. I also suspected that it would be common among the dwellers of savage lands near the ocean. The isolated incident of the Devil's Cauldron substantiated this belief.

With some satisfaction in my heart I left the metaphysical library when I had finished my search for the day. As I crossed the sidewalk to the parking-station where I had left my car, I stood still in my tracks, gazing with horror upon the sight that met my eyes.

A dirty, tousled figure was dashing along the street, pursued by two policemen. He was clad in the lightest of garments that looked more like underwear or sleeping-clothes than anything else. He stumbled occasionally, but some instinct seemed to enable him to keep out of the grasp of his pursuers. He was carrying something which he balanced with great dexterity. I looked closely as he approached me and saw that it was a tank filled with water, and inside the tank was the slimiest collection of horrid things that I had ever seen—toads, lizards, water-snakes, all the loathsome life of the water was there. And as he approached me, eluding his pursuers by a hair, I saw that this man in pajamas was the once great Dr. Prendergast!

6. Dead Flies

But what a changed Dr. Prendergast! His professional manner had disappeared. His usually benign face was twisted in a snarl of fury, and his teeth gnashed and champed like a jungle animal lusting for blood. I was horrified at the metamorphosis in my friend.

The policeman explained that they had caught him robbing a near-by aquarium, and refused to believe his

"Green bodies sucked their way through the smooth water."

story that he had been ordered to take the reptiles that he still carried with such a jealous care.

My professional card and reputation, however, satisfied the officers, and, since the doctor refused to part with his treasure, saying he would die first, I finally agreed to pay for the stolen property, and the owner accepting my proposal, my friend was permitted to retain his prize.

Throughout the journey back to the hospital he babbled unceasingly about things I could barely understand. Hundreds of times he repeated the words "Master" and "B'Moth." He asserted that he had done the Master's bidding in stealing the reptiles, and called upon the Thing to reward him when the time came.

I questioned him a hundred times as to his reasons for stealing the tank and its contents, but a cunning look came into his eyes, and, try as I would, I could not elicit from him any reason for his act. He clung to his statement that he had but done the bidding of the Master and that he was to be rewarded for it.

His look held suspicion and distrust for me. Like that other poor creature, he sensed in me an enemy of his Master. At times I caught him leering at me with a murderous expression in his red-rimmed eyes, and I confess that I felt not wholly comfortable, there alone in a closed car with this madman who had been my friend.

It was with something approaching a sigh of relief that I drove in at the broad entrance to the hospital where he was still confined. He showed no disposition to resist the attendants who came to take him to his room, and seemed satisfied in the belief that he had accomplished his end.

When he entered his room, he carefully placed the tank and its contents upon a table in the center, and apparently gave it no further attention. I left him, then, and went to the office of the hospital.

The report was the same as usual. Dr. Prendergast had been sleeping well, and eating, but his moments of lucidity were fewer and farther apart. Even when he was normal, he seemed to brood under the weight of the obsession that was dominating him.

He had developed a mania for collecting insects of all kinds. He had begged the authorities of the hospital to procure for him jams and other sweetmeats, which, instead of eating, he placed in appropriate places about his room. With fiendish delight, he waited for the vermin that are bound to be attracted by the preserves.

His room was overrun with flies, ants and mice, but instead of destroying them he used every effort to encourage the horrid things. He had constructed boxes that acted as traps, and which the superintendent of the hospital informed me were filled to overflowing with various sorts of insects. He had one box filled with grasshoppers, another with ants, a third with flies, and so on.

This loathsome occupation was something that I could not understand. What was his purpose—for I felt reasonably sure there was a purpose — in making this collection? I could understand the tank of reptiles after my reading of Johannes. They were undoubtedly symbolic of the Master himself. Perhaps he had caught them in the belief that they were kin of that loathsome Thing. But the insects and vermin—these I could not explain at all.

I was not to remain in darkness for long, however. On returning to the room, I stood outside for a moment, and peered through the aperture in the door that is frequently used for observation purposes in mental cases. The simulated indifference of the doctor had passed away, and, under the impression that he was now alone, he was working furiously.

At first I could not understand his

occupation, but soon it flashed upon me what his horrible object was. In his hand was a box. It was filled with flies, in a semi-stupor, induced, I suppose, by want of food. The great man was slowly sprinkling handfuls of the pests out of the box where they lay too weak to move. He then fed them carefully to the vile creatures within the tank! I noticed at his hand other empty cages, and supposed that they had been filled with ants and grasshoppers. With a vile leer, he fed the last of the flies to a loathly water-snake, and with great contentment replaced the boxes in a neat pile upon a shelf.

Grasping the handle of the door firmly, I entered the room.

His face a mask of infamy, my friend whirled upon me with a champing of teeth. Like a cornered tiger about to strike, he crouched against the wall, but, with a smile, I seated myself upon a chair. Seeing this, and that I did not intend to interfere with his pets, he relaxed somewhat, and sat upon the bed. His face was cast in a moody pattern. His brow was knit in a frown as if pondering something.

Slowly the tensity of his body relaxed, his face assumed the normal lines of good humor that I had so often seen upon it, and he looked up.

"By heaven, Randall! If what I think has happened, I am better off dead!" he said.

"No matter what has happened, I am pleased to see that you are still fighting," I answered.

"Yes, but the effort is almost too much. I wanted to kill you when you came in. You had better watch me, for I am liable to do it the next time. A feeling came over me that you were in my way, or rather in the way of that hideous Thing that has me in its power, and that you ought to be killed and fed to the sharks."

"Why fed to the sharks?" I asked with much interest.

"Because they are of the sea—devour themselves. Every living thing they devour, if it is not of the sea, is another soul added to their power—to the power of B'Moth."

"Extraordinary!" I ejaculated in amazement.

"That's the word. But I know—I can't say *how* I know, but I feel it just the same—that the object of this business is to place an overwhelming power in the hands of the filthy abominations at the bottom of the sea, and in the depths of the jungle."

"You're right there. I've discovered that. Is that why you have been feeding those land creatures to the reptiles in that tank?"

He followed my pointing finger, and shrank from his pets in abject terror.

"Did I collect those things?" he asked quaveringly.

"Yes. Can't you remember it?"

"I have some idea of laying out bait for insects, under the impress of a will stronger than my own, but why I have those snakes, I don't know."

"You stole them this afternoon," I said quietly.

"Stole them, eh? I can't remember that at all. This thing is getting a pretty tight grip upon me. I'm afraid that unless we can do something, I am finished. I can't remember what I've been up to at all for the past few days. I'm losing this fight."

"We'll pull you through. My idea is that you obtained the reptiles in order to feed the other things to them, and thus increase the proportion of souls for the deep. I can't explain it any better, but you can follow, perhaps. You wanted to help this ghastly business by strengthening the mental influence of the Master and his kind." I shuddered as I found myself using the word "Master" so easily and familiarly.

"No doubt you're right. I can't imagine any other reason for such an act. The very sight of these green

slimy things chills me now. I can't think of it without a shudder."

"There's one thing I want to ask you."

"Go ahead," said my friend without much enthusiasm.

"Are there any particular times when this thing comes to you?"

"No particular times, but on certain occasions. By Jove, I ought to have thought of it before! It's when there is fog outside that I experience the drowsy feeling that precedes these attacks."

I could not repress a cry of pleasure when I heard this. I remembered my own experience in the automobile that night, now so long ago, as it seemed. The drowsy feeling had come to me with its stupefying accompaniment when the fog had rolled in through the cracks of the car. It had disappeared when I lighted the heater. An idea came to me—a possible means of saving my friend in his extremity.

I rang the bell for an attendant.

"Lay a fire, and light it immediately!" I ordered.

The attendant looked at me in amazement. The day was a hot one, and my order must have seemed as crazy as the sick man's ant-collecting.

"Hurry," I snapped, as I saw the look that I was coming to know spreading across the face of the patient.

The attendant flew like the wind, realizing that the matter must be important. While I anxiously watched the struggle that was, I know, going on in the mind of my friend, the fire was laid. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. His jaw was gritted in fierce resolve, as he watched the attendant futilely attempting to ignite the kindling.

There was no time to waste. I dashed out of the room and into the dispensary. My eyes found a bottle of alcohol. Snatching this from the hand of a startled intern, I ran back to the room as fast as my legs would carry me.

Dr. Prendergast was writhing upon the bed and clawing frantically at the tenuous wisps of gray mist that seemed to be stretching out their sinuous tentacles to draw him into their clutch. They seemed actually indued with life, as I am convinced they were. He lay upon the bed as though trying to hide from the relentless purpose of this unspeakable Thing that strove to blast his sanity.

The alcohol flew from my hand, the match ignited it, and the flames licked greedily at the kindling. The thin wisps of mist writhed and twisted, and gradually vanished as the fire gained volume and roared a menace to this evil Thing from the depths.

Upon the bed lay the racked form of my colleague, shuddering and weak, but smiling—and in his right mind!

7. More Light

"WE'VE won!" he cried jubilantly, grasping my hand.

"Rather say 'we are winning'," I smiled, pleased at the success of my experiment. "Don't let that fire out, no matter how hot it becomes in here, or you'll soon find out that this business isn't finished. Look! Can't you see it out there on the lawn? That mist — twisting and curling like a thwarted Thing? It's alive, I'll swear. If you let that fire out, or open this window, it'll be after us again with a vengeance! Don't forget—keep that fire burning night and day! It's life or death now!"

I left immediately, for I had much to do. I hurriedly drove to Brocklebank, a small town in the country. Stopping the car before the portals of a large residence, I rang the bell. The servant, who knew me well, ushered me without introduction into the library of my old friend, Geoffrey d'Arlancourt, a student of antiquities and strange beliefs. I wondered that I had not thought of him before.

I broached the subject on my mind without further delay:

"What do you know about the worship of the Behemoth, Jeff?"

He wrinkled his brows quizzically. "The Behemoth?—well, a little. It's apparently a mythical monstrosity that has been the focus of various forms of Satanism, pseudo-religion, and downright butchery."

I told him about my investigations into the writings of the mediæval philosophers, and what I had learned about the Thing.

"In that case you probably know more than I can tell you," he smiled, "except that you, perhaps, have never seen the worship actually practised."

"No, indeed," I said. "That's what I came to see you about."

"Well, I have. The name apparently has innumerable variations, but always the main idea is the same. I have sometimes been tempted to think that there may be some such thing in reality. You know, of course, that the so-called savage races are given to all forms of voodooism, animism, and the like. We say, in our sophistication, that this is only because they have not yet learned a true sense of values. I am often inclined to think that it is because they are freer in their subjective processes than we are. They think that a tree has power for good and ill. We say it is not possible, and yet Bose, for instance, to mention only one of the great scientists, has conclusively proved that a plant has feeling of joy and pain, and actually cries aloud when hurt. These people, being more readily receptive to influences that we deem spiritual (because we can not otherwise comprehend them), are naturally those among whom such a worship might find a firm foothold. The nearer we go to life in its bald reality, the nearer we come to the worship of the Behemoth and other allied things."

"Do you mean to imply that this worship is beneficial?" I questioned, in some surprize.

"I won't say that, but I will say that it serves a very definite purpose in filling a gap that we of civilized times have left void. But to return: If you want to find examples of Behemoth worship, look for them among the lower strata of society—in the hot countries, among the aboriginals of New Zealand, and so on. It was in such places that I found innumerable instances of it on my recent cruise. I confess that I was greatly surprized at the prevalence of the thing. It is spreading at an alarming rate."

"Tell me the details," I said breathlessly. Apparently I was on the trail at last.

"Substantially, the worship is the same everywhere, and its very similarity gives it the appearance of representing a widespread truth. It appears to be related to a real, a living thing. The great idea back of it is that the time is rapidly approaching when the jungle will return to its own, when civilization will be wiped out, and the law of power will again prevail.

"Apparently this Behemoth has never been seen, but it can be felt. I almost believe I have felt it myself. Incantations are made in a language absolutely unintelligible to anybody; the medicine men themselves have told me that they can not apprehend the meaning except through the medium of traditional translations. And here is another strange thing: though I have seen this worship in New Guinea and Peru, in Malaysia and Finland, the syllables have always a similarity. The incantations are seemingly the same. They are merely unintelligible gibberish, more like the language of apes or the roar of the sea lion than speech, yet they are pronounced nearly alike by these widely separated races. Randall—*they mean something!*"

Again I felt my flesh beginning to creep at the thought of the tremendous power with which I had to deal.

How well did I know its obscene intent, its insidious force!

"What is the central feature of the worship?" I asked.

"There are two: a mystic union with the Behemoth, which means a pledge to aid in the restoration of the jungle and the overthrow of civilization; and secondly, the objective side, which includes the sacrificing of unbelievers, usually to members of the reptilian species, though I have seen children given to huge and bloated jaguars, who were kept as sacred symbols."

"I suppose there are even places here where this foul abomination holds sway," I suggested with a flutter of anxiety.

"Not a doubt of it. The thing is apparently gaining currency everywhere; why not here? I could almost tell you where to look to find the worship practised."

I then told d'Arlancourt everything that had led me to make these inquiries. When I had finished, his face was tense and fearful.

"This is monstrous! I can scarcely believe it. If it is true, we must take steps immediately to root out this cancerous putridity at its very heart. Wait!"

He walked across to the bookcase and selected a volume. For some minutes he read in silence. Then he spoke:

"There appear to be some secret orders founded upon this worship. The names will, in all probability, be changed, but they may be close enough for us to discover more. One is the Macrocosm. Another is the order of Phemaut, a very ancient one, originating in Egyptian times, and worshiping as its symbol the hippopotamus. If my memory serves me aright, the word for hippopotamus in the language of the third dynasty was P-ehe-maut: very similar to Behemoth, you see.

"Now, we shall ascertain if there are any relics of this business in Twentieth Century America."

He lifted the telephone receiver, and a chill dread came over me. I felt again that nameless and overwhelming fear that presaged the coming of the Thing.

D'Arlancourt was speaking. "Secret service? Give me Ellery. Tell him it is d'Arlancourt. Yes, please. Hello—yes, this is Jeff. I want to know whether you have any reports on secret societies that bear a name like Phemaut, B'Moth or Behemoth—a name something similar to that. What—good heavens! We'll be over, right away."

He turned to me, and his face was gray. "He says there are known to be about a thousand societies going by the name Phemaut, and many more with similar names, and that, after raiding them, the police have discovered tons of bones—human bones, charred, and in many cases, buried. But worst of all, he says these societies have been suspected of destructive intent of the worst kind—incendiarism, dynamiting, murder, and the like. Randall, you have put your finger upon the worst sore the human race has yet had to cauterize!"

8. The High Priest

WE FOUND Ellery caressing a beautiful police dog, a pet which he had trained from puppyhood.

D'Arlancourt rapidly described to the secret service man what I had already told him. Ellery received the information, at first with a quizzical smile, but, under the accumulation of evidence that we were able to present, his face took on a grave mien. He called his secretary, and instructed him to obtain a certain address.

"And send a telegram to the secret service departments of every civilized country, in code," he added. "Inquire if there have been any signs of an attempt—what shall I say?" he stopped, looking helplessly at us.

"Ask if there have been any overt attempts that appear to be directed by secret societies to rehabilitate the life of primitive times at the present day," I put in suggestively.

"But they'll think me crazy. They won't know what I mean."

"They'll know well enough if they have run into anything like what we are dealing with here," said d'Arlancourt quickly. "If they don't, they will only think the cable has been garbled in transmission."

"All right, put in something like that. Ask particularly if they have had any trouble from groups of people who worship any animal, or any reptile, particularly one that resembles a hippopotamus."

"Very well, sir," said the secretary with a slight smirk.

"That's all," snapped Ellery.

We left the office together, and drove to the meeting-place that the detective wished us to visit. Ugly rumors had been associated with it, and there was some probability that we should find what we sought there.

The night was fast falling as we approached the hall. It was in a squalid and miserable section of the city. We parked the car some distance away, and mingling with the motley throng that sought admission, we entered the building, and seated ourselves near the rear door.

The place was almost filled, and very soon after our entry the lights commenced to dim. They dwindled to mere dots of green flame, and there arose a chorus of meaningless babble like the chatter of apes in the forests of the Amazon. This was evidently the greeting extended to the high priest of Behemoth, who was now entering.

He was clothed in a shining green robe that was apparently made from the skin of some monster of the deep. Like decaying fish, it glowed a bluish green, and surrounded the repulsive features of a mask that he wore with a fiendish, unnatural light. Slowly he mounted the steps to the rostrum. I saw that there was before him a tank which glowed with that lambent blue fire that I had seen in the glass when the insane man had died in the German-American Hospital.

I found it impossible to repress a shudder. The place was almost dark, and except for the priest on the rostrum, we could see nothing but the tiny points of green that indicated the colored electric lights.

There appeared to be no ceremonial or ritual in connection with the business. Everybody did as he pleased, but always there was that wild jargon, that reminded me of the forest. At my left hand sat a huge negro, and close to him was a woman, with pendulous jowl, and huge teeth projecting from between thick lips. Her shouts almost rent my eardrums.

As the affair went forward, the crowd became ecstatic, and many threw themselves in transports upon the floor, tearing their clothes away from their bodies and dancing wildly in the eery darkness. Many carried tame serpents which they lovingly caressed; others had tiny monkeys which they kissed affectionately. Men and women alike threw themselves upon each other in a frenzy of mad abandon. I saw a Malay struggling in the arms of a white woman, and heard their shouts of ecstasy. I saw others sinking teeth deep into the arms, the legs, the shoulders of those nearest to them in an insane fury of primeval ferocity. There was a beautiful girl, her white body stripped naked, lying in the brutal embrace of a bronze figure, drinking in with passionate abandon the kisses he showered upon her. Apes flitted hither and thither among the crazed throng, receiving homage wherever they passed. Serpents writhed, their slimy coils encircling the throats of the devotees. And the shouting rose to a bedlam of unintelligible sound. The air was becoming thicker every minute. I could not understand it

at first, but soon it was clear to me. I had seen that heavy greenish vapor before. It was the breath of that hellish atrocity that these deluded wretches worshiped. It seemed to overhang the whole hall, enveloping all in its clammy folds. I felt the sickly touch of it, and writhed as though in the grip of some loathsome Thing. My companions sat there with drawn faces, their muscles tensed in an effort to resist the awful spectacle.

The cries rapidly blended themselves into a rhythmical shouting. Into my dazed senses there was borne the sound of a single phrase: "B'Moth . . . Master!" It was repeated a thousand times as the heavy pall closed in upon us thicker and thicker.

The giant negro sitting at my side spoke to me in a roar of joy. "The Master is almost ready," he shouted above the din. "A few more days and the world will feel his power." He beat his brows, and cried in ecstasy, "Come . . . B'Moth . . . Master, come!" I nodded in pretended agreement, and he went on with his shouting.

A woman threw her arms about me and whispered foul things into my ear. Suddenly the attention of the crowd was centered upon the priest at the rostrum. He had uncovered the tank of water upon the platform, and to my horror I saw there, with jaws agape, a huge crocodile. It seemed clothed with the sulfurous glow like everything else.

Into the pandemonium of noise there was injected a new and startling sound—a shriek, shrill and piercing in its power—the voice of a woman in mortal terror! I strained my eyes through the heavy vapor, and saw—good God!—it was a woman that this monstrous priest held aloft over the tank! His purpose was plain. He intended to feed her to the filthy thing in the water.

I stared in horror. Action paralyzed my limbs. I could not lift an arm to save her! At my side there roared forth a deafening blast. A spurt of flame pierced the night. Ellery had fired his automatic. In fascinated horror I saw the tank splinter as the bullet pierced it. Water, tons of it, poured forth, iridescent and phosphorescent, covering the devotees. The crocodile slithered to the floor, and floundered rampant among those nearest him. His red-smeared jaws champed furiously at the arms and legs of the people in the front seats, while Ellery fired and fired.

At last he found his mark. The crocodile writhed in mortal agony, flapped his tail, striking half a dozen men who were bowing before him, and died. The priest dropped the girl, and commenced to run. In his haste, the slimy mask which covered his face became dislodged, and fell to the ground.

I stared in stark horror at the lust-distorted visage that was revealed to me. My brain reeled in loathing. As I gazed, fascinated, at the twisted features of that face, at the blood-frenzied, dilating nostrils, I wondered how man could sink so low. For the face into which I looked as the priest closed a door behind him and disappeared from the hall was the once kindly one of the great Dr. Prendergast.

9. Jaws of the Jungle

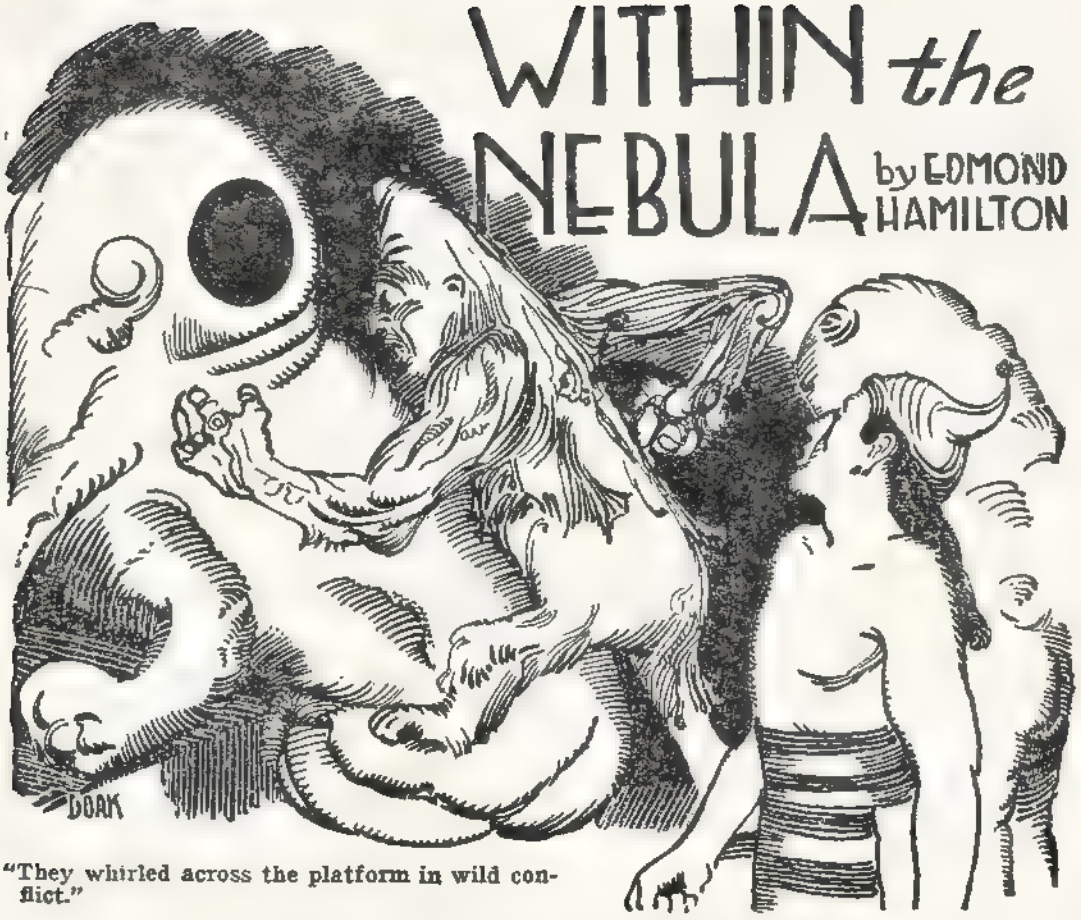
THE girl came dashing up the aisle and disappeared into the street. We were in a dangerous position. The frenzied mob turned upon us with murderous lust, and scratching, punching and panting we were borne to the floor. Again Ellery's gun spat lead and flame, and the crowd edged away from him. In the lull, we dashed for the door and escaped across the street into the car.

We saw the girl standing in the street. Hastily telling her to get into

(Continued on page 711)

WITHIN *the* NEBULA

by EDMOND HAMILTON



"They whirled across the platform in wild conflict."

STANDING at the controls, beside me, the silent steersman raised his hand for a moment to point forward through the pilot room's transparent wall.

"Canopus at last," he said, and I nodded. Together, and in silence, we gazed ahead.

Before and around us there stretched away the magnificent panorama of interstellar space, familiar enough to our eyes but ever new, a vast reach of deep black sky dotted thickly with the glittering hosts of stars. The blood-red of Antares, the pale green of great Sirius, the warm, golden light of Capella, they flamed in the firmament about us like splendid jewels of light. And dead ahead there shone the one orb that dwarfed and dimmed all the others, a titanic radiant white sun whose blazing circle seemed to fill the heavens before us, the mighty star of Canopus, vastest of all the Galaxy's thronging suns.

For all that I had visited it many times before, it was with something of awe that I contemplated the great white sun, as our ship flashed on toward it. Its colossal blazing bulk, I knew, was greater far than the whole of our own little solar system, millions of times larger than our own familiar little star, infinitely the most glorious of all the swarming suns. It seemed fitting, indeed, that at Canopus had been located the seat of the great Council of Suns of which I was myself a member, representing our own little solar system in that mighty deliberative body whose members were drawn from every peopled star.

In thoughtful silence I gazed toward the mighty sun ahead, and for a time there was no sound in the bridgeroom except for the deep humming of the ship's generators, whose propulsion-vibrations flung us on through space. Then, against the dazzling glare of the gigantic star ahead, there appeared a tiny black dot, expanding swiftly in size as we raced on toward it. Around and beyond it other dots were coming into view, also, changing as we flashed on to disks, to globes, to huge and swarming planets that spun in vast orbits about their mighty parent sun. And it was toward the largest and inmost of these whirling worlds, the seat of the great Council, that our ship was now slanting swiftly downward.

Beneath us I could see the great planet rapidly expanding and broadening, until its tremendous coppery sphere filled all the heavens below. By that time our velocity had slackened to less than a light-speed, and even this speed decreased still further as we entered the zone of traffic about the great planet. For a few moments we dropped cautiously downward through the swarming masses of interstellar ships which jammed the upper levels, and then had swept past the busy traffic-boats into one of the great descension-lanes, and were moving smoothly down toward the planet's surface.

Around us there swarmed all the myriads of inbound ships that filled the descension-lane, drawn from every quarter of the Galaxy toward Canopus, the center and capital of our universe. Long cargo-ships from far Spica there were, laden with all the strange merchandise of that sun's circling worlds; luxurious passenger-liners from Regulus and Altair, filled with tourists eager for their first sight of great Canopus; swift little boats from the thronging suns and worlds of the great Hercules cluster; battered tramps which owned no sun as home, but cruised eternally through the Galaxy, carrying chance cargoes from star to star; and here and there among the swarms of alien ships a human-manned craft from our own distant little solar system. All these and a myriad others raced smoothly beside and around us as we shot down toward the mighty world beneath.

Swiftly, though, the traffic about us branched away and thinned as we dropped nearer to the planet's surface. Beneath the light of the immense white sun above, its landscape lay clearly revealed, a far-sweeping panorama of smoothly sloping plains and valleys, parklike in its alternation of lawn and forest. Here and there on the surface of this world sprawled its shining cities, over whose streets and towers our cruiser sped as we flashed on. Then, far ahead, a single mighty gleaming spire became visible against the distant horizon, growing as we sped on toward it into a colossal tower all of two thousand feet square at its base, and which aspired into the radiant sunlight for fully ten thousand feet. On each side of it there branched away a curving line of smaller buildings, huge enough in themselves but dwarfed to toylike dimensions by the looming grandeur of the stupendous tower. And it was down toward the smooth sward at the tower's base that our ship was slanting now, for this was the seat of the great Council of Suns itself.

Down we sped toward the mighty structure's base, down over the great buildings on either side which housed the different departments of the Galaxy's government, down until our ship had come smoothly to rest on the ground a hundred feet from the tower itself. Then the ship's hull-door was clanging open, and a moment later I had stepped onto the ground outside and was striding across the smooth sward toward the mighty tower. Through its high-arched doorway I passed, and down the tremendous corridor inside toward the huge doors at its end, which automatically slid smoothly sidewise as I approached. The next moment I had

passed through them and stood in the Hall of the Council itself.

Involuntarily, as always, I paused on entering, so breath-taking was the immensity of the place. A single vast circular room, with a diameter of near two thousand feet, it covered almost all the mighty tower's first floor. From the edge of the great circle the room's floor sloped gently down toward its center, like a vast shallow bowl, and at the center stood the small black platform of the Council Chief. Out from that platform back clear to the great room's towering walls were ranged the countless rows of seats, just filling now with the great Council's thousands of members.

Beings there were among those thousands from every peopled sun in all the Galaxy's hosts, drawn here like myself each to represent his star in this great Council which ruled our universe. Creatures there were utterly weird and alien in appearance, natives of the whirling worlds of the Galaxy's farthest stars—creatures from Aldebaran, turtle-men of the amphibian races of that star; fur-covered and slow-moving beings from the planets of dying Betelgeuse; great octopus-creatures from mighty Vega; invertebrate insect-men from the races of Procyon; strange, dark-winged bat-folk from the weird worlds of Deneb; these, and a thousand others, were gathered in that vast assemblage, forms utterly different from each other physically, but able to mix and understand each other on the common plane of intelligence.

WITHIN another moment I had passed down the broad aisle and had slipped into my own seat, and now I saw that on the black platform at the room's center there stood silent the Council Chief. A strange enough figure he made, for he was of the races of Canopus, natives of this giant star-system, a great, unhuman head with no body and with but a single staring eye, carrying himself on tiny, pipe-stem limbs. Silently he stood there, contemplating the gathering members. Within another minute all had taken their seats, and then a sudden hush swept over them as the Council Chief stepped forward and began to speak, in the tongue that has become universal throughout the Galaxy, his strange, high voice carried to every end of the vast room by the great amplifiers which make every whisper in it clearly heard.

"Members of the Council," he said, "I have called this meeting, have summoned you here to Canopus, each from his native star, because I have to place before you a matter of the utmost importance. I have summoned you here because there has risen to face us the most vital problem that has yet confronted us in our government of the Galaxy—the greatest and most terrible danger, in fact, that has ever threatened our universe!

"Other dangers, other problems, have faced us in the past, and all these we have overcome, by massing all our knowledge and science, have ruled with more and more power over the inanimate matter of our universe, our Galaxy. We have saved planets and their peoples from extinction, by shifting them from dying old suns to flaming new ones. We have succeeded in breaking up and annihilating some of the great comets whose headlong flights were carrying destruction across the Galaxy. We have even dared to change the course of suns, to prevent collisions between them that would have annihilated their circling worlds. It might seem, indeed, that we, the massed peoples of the Galaxy, have risen to such power that all things in it are subject to our will, obedient to our commands. But we have not. One thing alone in the Galaxy remains beyond our power to change or alter, one thing beside which all our power and our science are as nothing. And that is the nebula.

"A nebula is the vastest thing in all our universe, and the most mysterious. A gigantic mass of glowing gas

that stretches across countless billions of miles of space, its mighty bulk flames in the heavens like a universe of fire. Beside its vast dimensions all the suns of the Galaxy are but as sparks beside a great, consuming blaze. Here and there in our Galaxy lie these mighty mysteries, these flaming nebulæ, and mightiest of all is that one which we call the Orion Nebula, that gigantic globe of flaming gas which measures light-years in diameter, burning in giant splendor at the Galaxy's heart. We know that the great nebula is growing slowly smaller, that through the eons it contracts to form new blazing stars, but what its constitution may be, what mysteries it may hide, has never been known, since it would be annihilation for any ship to approach too near to its fiery splendor, and all our interstellar traffic has detoured always far around its flaming mass. Because of that inaccessibility no large attention has ever been paid to the great nebula, nor would there be now, had not something been discovered but now by our scientists regarding it which seems to herald the end of our universe.

"As I have said, this nebula, this gigantic globe of flaming gas, lies practically motionless in space at the heart of our Galaxy. A few weeks ago, however, it was discovered by our astronomers that the great flaming sphere of the nebula had begun slowly to revolve, to spin, and that as the days went by it was spinning faster and faster. Through the weeks since then our astronomers have watched it closely, and ever faster it has spun, until now it is revolving at a terrific rate, a rate that is still steadily increasing. And that accelerating spin of the huge nebula must result, inevitably, in the doom of our universe.

"For our scientists have calculated that within two more weeks the nebula's rate of spin will have become so great that it will no longer be able to hold together, that it will disintegrate, break up, its gigantic masses of incandescent gases flying off in all directions like the pieces of a bursting fly-wheel. And those colossal clouds of flaming gas, flying out through our Galaxy, our universe, will inevitably sweep over and destroy countless thousands of our suns and worlds, annihilating the worlds like midgets in candle-flame, changing the suns into nebulous masses of flaming gas like themselves, smashing gigantically through and across the Galaxy and destroying the gravitational balance of its whirling suns and worlds until in a great chaos of crashing stars and planets our universe ends as a vast, cosmic wreck, our organizations and our civilizations gone forever!"

The Council Chief paused for a moment, and in that moment there was silence over all the great hall, a silence unnatural, terrible, unbroken by any slightest sound. I saw the members about me leaning forward, gazing tensely toward the Council Chief, and when he spoke again his words seemed to come to us through that strained silence as though from some remoteness of distance.

"Terrible as this peril is," he was saying, "we must face it. Flight is impossible, for where could we flee? We have but one chance to save ourselves, our universe, and that is to halt the spinning of the great nebula before the few days left us have passed, before this cosmic cataclysm takes place. Some extraordinary force or forces have set the great nebula to spinning thus, and if we could venture out to the nebula, discover the nature of those forces, we might be able to counteract them, to stop the nebula's spin and save our suns and worlds.

"It is impossible, of course, for any of our ordinary interstellar ships to attempt this, since any that approached the great nebula would perish instantly in its flaming heat. It chances, however, that some of our scientists here have been working for months on the problem of devising new heat-resistant materials, materials capable of resisting temperatures

which would destroy other substances. They have worked on the principle that heat-resistance is a matter of atomic structure. Steel, for instance, resists heat and fire better than wood because its atomic structure, the arrangement of its atoms, is more stable, less easily broken up. And following this principle they have devised a new metallic compound or alloy whose atomic structure is infinitely more stable than that of any material known to us previously, and which is able to resist temperatures of thousands of degrees.

"Of this heat-resistant material an interstellar cruiser was constructed, a cruiser which could venture into regions of heat where other ships would perish instantly. It had been the intention to use this cruiser to explore solar coronas, but at my order it has been brought here to the Council Hall, equipped for action. For it is my intention to use this cruiser to venture out close to the great nebula's flaming fires, which it alone can do, and make a last effort to discover and counteract whatever force or forces there are causing the accelerating spin of the nebula that means doom to us. The cruiser itself is not a large one, and with its present equipment can hold but three for this trip, three on whom must rest all the chances for escape of our universe. And these three I intend to choose now from among you, three whose past careers and interstellar experience make them best fitted for this hazardous and all-important trip."

He paused again, and over the massed members there swept now a whisper of excitement, a low babel of a thousand unlike voices that stilled suddenly as the Council Chief again spoke, his high, clear voice sounding across the great room like a whip-crack.

"Sar Than of Arcturus!"

As he called the name a single figure rose from among the members to my left, a bulbous body supported above the ground by four powerful thick tentacles of muscle which served both as arms and legs, while set upon the body was the round, neckless head, with its two quick, intelligent eyes and narrow mouth. A moment the Arcturian paused on rising, then stepped out into the aisle and down toward the central platform. And now the voice of the Council Chief cut again across the rising clamor of the members.

"Jor Dahat of Capella!"

Before me now another figure rose, one of the strange plant-men of Capella, of the people who had evolved to intelligence and power from the lower plant-races there; his body an upright cylinder of smooth, fibrous flesh, supported by two short, thick legs and with a pair of powerful upper arms, above which was the conical head whose two green-pupiled eyes and close-set ears and mouth completed the figure. In a moment he too had strode down toward the platform, and then, over the tumultuous shouts of those in the great hall, which had risen now to a steady roar of voices, there came the clear voice of the Council Chief, with the third name.

"Ker Kal of Sun-828!"

For a moment I sat silent, my brain whirling, the words of the Council Chief drumming in my ears, and then heard the excited voices of the members about me, felt myself stumbling to my feet and down the aisle in turn toward the platform. Beating in my dazed ears now was the tremendous shouting clamor of all the gathered members, and beneath that surging thunder of thousands of voices I sensed but dimly the things about me, the Arcturian and Capellan beside me, the figure of the Council Chief on the platform beyond them. Then I saw the latter raise a slender arm, felt the uproar about me swiftly diminishing, until complete silence reigned once more. And then the Council Chief was speaking again, this time to us.

"Sar Than, Jor Dahat and Ker

Kal," he addressed us, "you three are chosen to go where only three can go, to approach the nebula and make a final effort to discover and counteract whatever force or forces there are causing this cataclysm that threatens us. Your cruiser is ready and you will start at once, and to you I have no orders to give, no instructions, no advice. My only word to you is this: If you fail in this mission, where failure seems all but inevitable, indeed, our Galaxy meets its doom, the countless trillions of our races their deaths, the civilizations we have built up in millions of years annihilation. But if you succeed, if you find what forces have caused the spinning of the mighty nebula and are able to halt that spin, then your names shall not die while any in the Galaxy live. For then you will have done what never before was done or dreamed of, will have stayed with your hands a colossal cosmic wreck, will have saved a universe itself from death!"

2

As the door of the little pilot room clicked open behind me I half turned from my position at the controls, to see my two companions enter. And as the Arcturian and Capellan stepped over to my side I nodded toward the broad fore-window.

"Two more hours and we'll be there," I said.

Side by side we three gazed ahead. About us once more there stretched the utter blackness of the great void, ablaze with its jeweled suns. Far behind shone the brilliant white star that was Canopus, and to our right the great twin suns of Castor and Pollux, and above and beyond them the yellow spark that was the sun of my own little solar system. On each side and behind us hung the splendid starry canopy, but ahead it was blotted out by a single vast circle of glowing light that filled the heavens before us, titanic, immeasurable, the mighty nebula that was our goal.

For more than ten days we had watched the vast globe of flaming gas largening across the heavens as we raced on toward it, in the heat-resistant cruiser that had been furnished us by the Council. Days they were in which our generators had hummed always at their highest power, propelling our craft forward through space with the swiftness of thought,- almost—long, changeless days in which the alternate watches in the pilot room and the occasional inspection of the throbbing generators had formed our only occupations.

On and on and on we had flashed, past sun after sun, star system after star system. Many times we had swerved from our course as our meteorometers warned us of vast meteor swarms ahead, and more than once we had veered to avoid some thundering dark star which our charts showed near us, but always the prow of our craft had swung back toward the great nebula. Ever onward toward it we had raced, day after day, watching its glowing sphere widen across the heavens, until now at last we were drawing within sight of our journey's end, and were flashing over the last few billions of miles that separated us from our goal.

And now, as we drew thus nearer toward the nebula's fiery mass, we saw it for the first time in all its true grandeur. A vast sphere of glowing light, of incandescent gases, it flamed before us like some inconceivably titanic sun, reaching from horizon to horizon, stunning in its very magnitude. Up and outward from the great fiery globe there soared vast tongues of flaming gas, mighty prominences of incalculable length, leaping out from the gigantic spinning sphere. For the sphere, the nebula, was spinning. We saw that, now, and could mark the turning of its vast surface by the position of those leaping tongues, and though that turning seemed slow to our eyes by reason of the nebula's very vastness, we knew that in reality it was whirling at a terrific rate.

For a long time there was silence in the little pilot room while we three gazed ahead, the glowing light from the vast nebula before us beating in through the broad window and illuminating all about us in its glare. At last Sar Than, beside me, spoke.

"One sees now why no interstellar ship has ever dared to approach the nebula," he said, his eyes on the colossal sea of flame before us.

I nodded at the Arcturian's comment. "Only our own ship would dare to come as close as we are now," I told him. "The temperature outside is hundreds of degrees, now." And I pointed toward a dial that recorded the outside heat.

"But how near can we go to it?" asked Jor Dahat. "How much heat can our cruiser stand?"

"Some thousands of degrees," I said, answering the plant-man's last question first. "We can venture within a few thousand miles of the nebula's surface without danger, I think. But if we were to go farther, if we were to plunge into its fires, even our ship could not resist the tremendous heat there for long, and would perish in a few minutes. We will be able, though, to skim above the surface without danger."

"You plan to do that, to search above the nebula's surface for the forces that have set it spinning?" asked the Capellan, and I nodded.

"Yes. There may be great ether-currents of some kind there which are responsible for this spin, or perhaps other forces of which we know nothing. If we can only find what is causing it, there will be at least a chance——" And I was silent, gazing thoughtfully toward the far-flung raging fires ahead.

Now, as our ship raced on toward that mighty ocean of flaming gas, the pointer on the outside-heat dial was creeping steadily forward, though the ship's interior was but slightly warmer, due to the super-insulation of its walls. We were passing into a region of heat, we knew, that would have destroyed any ship but our own, and that thought held us silent as our humming craft raced on. And now the sky before us, a single vast expanse of glowing flame, was creeping downward across our vision as the cruiser's bow swung up. Minutes more, and the whole vast flaming nebula lay stretched beneath us, instead of before us, and then we were dropping smoothly down toward it.

Down we fell, my hand on the control lever gradually decreasing our speed, now moving at a single light-speed, now at half of that, and still slower and slower, until at last our craft hung motionless a scant thousand miles above the nebula's flaming surface, a tiny atom in size compared to the colossal universe of fire above which it hovered. For from horizon to horizon beneath us, now, stretched the nebula, in terrible grandeur. Its flaming sea, we saw, was traversed by great waves and currents, currents that met here and there in gigantic fiery maelstroms, while far across its surface we saw, now and then, great leaping prominences or geysers of flaming gas, that towered for an instant to immense heights and then rushed back down into the fiery sea beneath. To us, riding above that burning ocean, it seemed at that moment that in all the universe was only flame and gas, so brain-numbing was the fiery nebula's magnitude.

Hanging there in our little cruiser we stared down at it, the awe we felt reflected in each other's eyes. I saw now by the dial that the temperature about us was truly terrific, over a thousand degrees, and what it might be in the raging fires below I could not guess. But nowhere was there any sign of what might have set the great nebula to spinning, for our instruments recorded no ether-disturbances around the surface, nor any other phenomena which might give us a clue. And, looking down, I think that we all felt, indeed, that nothing was in reality capable of affecting in any

way this awesome nebula, the vastest thing in all our universe.

At last I turned to the others. "There's nothing here," I said. "Nothing to show what's caused the nebula's spinning. We must go on, across its surface——"

With the words I reached forward toward the control levers, then abruptly whirled around as there came a sudden cry from Sar Than, at the window.

"Look!" cried the Arcturian, pointing down through the window, his eyes starting. "Below us—look!"

I gazed down, then felt the blood drive from my heart at what I saw. For directly beneath us one of the vast prominences of flaming gas was suddenly shooting up from the nebula's surface, straight toward us, a gigantic tongue of fire beside which our ship was but as a midge beside a great blaze. I shouted, sprang to the controls, but even as I laid hands on the levers there was a tremendous rush of blinding flame all about our ship, and then we three had been flung violently into a corner of the pilot room and the cruiser was being whirled blindly about with lightning speed by the vast current of flaming gas that had gripped it.

All about us was the thunderous roaring of the fires that held us, and now as we sprawled helpless on the room's floor I sensed that our ship was falling, plunging down with the downward-sinking geyser of flame that held it. Struggling to gain my feet, while the pilot room spun dizzily about me, I glimpsed through the shifting fires outside the window the nebula's flaming surface, just below us, a raging sea of fiery gas toward which we were dropping plummetlike. Then, as a fresh gyration of the plunging ship flung me once more to the floor, I heard the thundering roar about us suddenly intensified, terrible beyond expression, while now through the window was visible only a single solid mass of blinding flame, and while our cruiser at the same moment rocked and whirled crazily beneath the impetus of a dozen different forces. And as understanding of what had happened flashed across my brain I cried out hoarsely to my two companions.

"The nebula!" I cried. "That current that held us has sucked us down into the nebula itself!"

All about us now was only one tremendous sheet of fire, whose heat was rapidly penetrating through even our heat-resistant walls and windows. Swiftly the air in the little pilot room was becoming hot, suffocating, and already the walls were burning to the touch. The ship, I knew, could not stand such heat for many minutes more, yet every moment was taking us farther into the nebula's fiery depths, whirling us wildly on with velocity inconceivable. Born by its mighty interior currents we were sweeping on and on into that universe of flame, its vast fires roaring about us like the thunder of doom, deafening, awful, a cosmic, bellowing clamor that was like the mighty shouting of a universe made vocal.

On and on it roared, about us, and on and on we whirled into the depths of those mighty fires, toward our doom. The air had become stifling, unbreathable, and the walls were beginning to glow dully. Now, with a last effort, I dragged myself from support to support until I had clutched the control levers, opening them to the last notch. Yet though the generators beneath hummed with highest power it was as though they were silent, for in the grip of the nebula's giant fire-currents the cruiser plunged madly on. And as its whirling catapulted me again to the room's corner, where my two companions clung, I felt my lungs scorching with each panting breath, felt my senses leaving me.

Then, through the unconsciousness that was creeping upon me, I heard a grating wrench from somewhere in the cruiser's walls, a loud and ominous cracking, and knew that under

the terrific fires around us those walls were already warping, giving way. Another wrenching crack came, and another, sounding loud in my ears above the thunderous roar of the flames about us. In a moment the walls would give completely, and in the rushing fires of the nebula about us we would meet the end. In a moment——

But what was that? The thunderous clamor about us had suddenly dwindled, ceased, and at the same moment our ship had righted itself, was humming serenely on. Slowly I raised my head, then stared in utter astonishment. The fires outside the windows, the terrific sea of flame about us, had vanished, and we were again flashing on through open space. And now Jor Dahat beside me had seen also, and was rising to his feet.

"We're out of the nebula!" he cried. "That current must have taken us back up to the surface—back out into space again——"

He was at the window now, gazing eagerly out, while I struggled up in turn. And as I did so I saw awe falling upon his face as he gazed, and heard from him a whispered exclamation of utter astonishment. Then I, too, was on my feet, with Sar Than, and we were at the window beside him, staring forth in turn.

MY FIRST impression was of vast space, a colossal reach of space that stretched far away before us, and into which our ship was racing on. And then I saw, with sudden awe and wonder, that this vast space was not the unlimited, unbounded space we were accustomed to, but was limited, was bounded, bounded by a colossal sheet of flowing flame that hemmed it in in all directions. Above and below and before and behind us stretched this mighty wall of flame, a gigantic shell of fire that enclosed within itself the vast space in which our cruiser raced, a space large enough to hold within it a dozen solar systems like my own. Stunned, we gazed out into that mighty flame-bounded space, and then I flung out a hand toward it in sudden comprehension.

"We're inside the nebula!" I cried. "It's hollow! This vast open space lies at its heart, and those currents carried us down into it!"

For I saw now that this was the explanation. Unsuspected by any in the Galaxy the mighty nebula was hollow, its gigantic globe of flaming gas holding at its heart this mighty empty space, a space mighty in extent to our eyes, but small compared to the thickness of the great shell of fire that enclosed it. And down through that fire, that vast ocean of flame, the currents of the nebula had brought us, from its outer surface, down into this great space at its heart of which none had ever dreamed, and into which we had been the first in all the Galaxy to penetrate.

While we gazed across it, stunned, our cruiser was racing on into this vast hollow, away from the wall of flame behind us from which we had just emerged. And now, as we flashed on, Sar Than cried out too, and pointed ahead. There, standing out black against the encircling walls of fire in the distance, was a small round spot, a spot that was growing to a black globe as we hurtled on toward it, a globe that hung motionless at the center of this mighty space, here at the nebula's heart. We were racing straight into the great cavity toward it, and now there came a low exclamation from Jor Dahat, beside me, as his eyes took in the great globe ahead.

"A planet!" he whispered. "A planet here—within the nebula!"

My own eyes were fixed upon it, and slowly I nodded, but made no other answer as we flashed on toward the object of our attention, the black sphere ahead. And now as we swept on we saw that it was a sphere of truly titanic dimensions, larger by far than any of the Galaxy's countless worlds, and that as it hung there, at the nebula's heart, it was

slowly revolving, spinning, as fast or faster than the nebula itself. Black and mighty it hung there, while all around it, millions of miles from it, there flamed the nebula's encircling fires. On and on we raced toward it, and for all those minutes of flashing flight none of us spoke, and there was no sound in the pilot room but the throbbing drone of the generators below. I think that we all felt instinctively that in the grim, colossal globe ahead lay the answer to what we had come to solve, and as we hurtled on toward it we watched it broadening before us in tense silence.

Larger and larger it was becoming, larger until its great black circle filled half the heavens before us. By then I had decreased our speed to a fraction of its former figure, and as we swept in toward the giant world I lessened it still further. Slowly, ever more slowly we moved, and now were circling above the great black planet, were beginning to drop cautiously down toward it. Eagerly we watched as the mighty world's surface changed from convex to concave, and as we dropped on we saw the needle of our atmosphere-pressure dial moving steadily forward, to show that this strange world had air, at least. Then all else was forgotten as our eyes took in the scene below.

I think that we had all half expected to see some evidence of life and civilization on this strange world, some building or group of buildings, at least. But there was none such. Beneath us lay only a smooth black plain, extending from horizon to horizon, devoid of hill or stream or valley, in so far as we could see, unnaturally smooth and level. And as we dropped nearer, ever nearer, the surprize we felt rapidly intensified, until when at last we hung motionless a hundred feet above the surface of this world exclamations of utter astonishment broke from us. For seen thus near, the surface of this mighty planet was as utterly smooth and level as it had seemed from high above, a black, gleaming plain without an inch-high elevation or depression, an inconceivably strange smooth expanse of black *metal*, that stretched evenly away in every direction to the horizon, smoothly covering this colossal world.

We looked at each other, a little helplessly, then down again toward the smooth and gleaming surface below. In that surface was no visible opening, no sign of joint or crack, even, nothing but the smooth blank metal. Then with sudden resolution I thrust forward the levers in my hands, sent our cruiser racing low across the surface of the giant, metal-sheathed planet, while we gazed intently across that surface in search of any sign that might explain the enigma of its existence. On we sped, while beneath us flashed back the smooth metal plain, mile after endless mile. Then, gazing ahead, my eyes suddenly narrowed and I raised a pointing hand. For there, far ahead, I had glimpsed an opening in the gleaming surface, a round black opening that was resolving itself into a vast circular pit as our cruiser raced on toward it.

Nearer and nearer we flashed toward it, with Sar Than and Jor Dahat beside me gazing forward, their interest as tense as my own. And now we saw that the pit was of gigantic size, its circular mouth all of five miles in diameter, and that from its center there drove up toward the zenith a flickering beam of pale and ghostlike white light, so pale as hardly to be visible, a livid white ray that stabbed straight up toward the fires of the nebula far above. We were very near to the pale beam, now, flashing above the huge pit straight toward it. I had a glimpse of the great pit's perpendicular black metal walls, dropping down for miles into depths inconceivable, of something in those dusky depths

that burned like a great white star of light, and then Jor Dahat suddenly uttered a choking cry, flinging an arm out toward the livid ray before us.

"That ray!" he cried. "It's not light—it's force! The nebula—stop the ship!"

At that cry my hand flew out to the levers, but a moment too late. For before I could throw them back, could slow or stay our progress, we had raced straight into the great pale beam. The next moment there came a terrific crash, as though we had collided with a solid wall; our ship rocked drunkenly in midair for a single instant, and then was whirling crazily downward into the depths of the mighty pit below us.

3

MY ONLY memory now of that mad plunge downward is of the pilot room spinning about me, and of the whistling roar of winds outside caused by the speed of our fall. The shock of our collision had apparently silenced our generators, and it was moments before I could struggle up to the controls and make an effort to start them. I jerked open the switches and there came a hum of power from beneath; but the next moment with a jarring, grinding shock our cruiser had met the great pit's floor, flinging us once more to the floor.

For a moment we lay motionless there, and in that moment I became aware of sounds outside, soft rustling sounds that were hardly audible, as of soft-footed creatures moving about. The second shock had again silenced the vibration-mechanism, which I had started the moment before our crash, but I had no doubt that it was only that last-minute action on my part that had slowed our fall enough to save our ship and ourselves from annihilation. Now, staggering to my feet, I reached for the switch of the pilot room's little emergency door, sending it sliding back, admitting a rush of warm, fresh air, and then with my two companions behind me stared dazedly forth.

Our battered cruiser was resting now on the great pit's floor, a vast circular plain of smooth metal five miles in diameter, enclosed on all sides by vertical cliffs of gleaming metal that loomed for miles above us. A dusky twilight reigned here at the great shaft's bottom, but we saw now that that bottom was covered with countless great machines, enigmatic, shining mechanisms that covered the pit's floor completely except for a round clearing at its center, at the edge of which our cruiser rested. From each of the massed machines around us ran a slender tube-connection, and all of these tubes, thousands in number, combined to form a thick black metal cable which led into a huge object at the clearing's center. This was a giant squat cylinder of metal, its height no more than fifty feet but its diameter a full thousand, into the side of which the thick black cable led and whose upper surface shone with a vast brilliant white light that half dispelled the shadows here at the vast pit's bottom. It was from this brilliant upper surface of the cylinder that there sprang upward the great livid ray, a flickering beam of pale light that stabbed straight up toward the glowing fires of the nebula far above.

It was not on the great cylinder or on the massed machines around us, though, that our eyes first rested, but on the shapes, the creatures, who had gathered about our cruiser and stood before us. They were creatures of surpassing strangeness and horror, even to ourselves, unlike in form as we were. Each of them was simply a shapeless mass of plastic white flesh, several feet in thickness, a formless thing of pale flesh without limbs or features of any kind, the only distinguishing mark being a

round black spot on the body or mass of each. A dozen or more of them had gathered before us, a dozen shapeless masses of flesh resting on the smooth metal floor there, each with the black spot on his body turned up toward us like some strange eye, which, we knew instinctively, it in reality was.

As we watched them in horror, we saw one of them suddenly move toward us across the smooth metal. A limbless mass of flesh, he glided across the level floor as a snake might glide, the flesh of him flexing and twisting to bear him smoothly forward. Just beneath us he stopped, and there was a moment of tense silence while the whole scene impressed itself indelibly on my brain —the vast, metal-walled pit, the great ghostly ray that clove up through its shadowy dusk toward the nebula far above, the weird white masses of flesh before us. Then up from the creature below us there shot a long, slender arm, an arm that formed itself out of the flesh of his—*body*—like the pseudopod of a jelly-fish, reaching swiftly upward toward us.

That sight was enough to break the spell of horror that had held us, and with a strangled cry I fell back from the door, reached toward the controls to send our ship slanting up out of this place of horror. But as I did so there came a shout from my two companions, and I whirled around to see a half-dozen pseudopod arms reach in through the open door, and then by that grip six or more of the weird creatures had drawn themselves up into the pilot room, and were upon us.

I felt cold, boneless arms twine swiftly around my neck and body, struck out in blind rage against the twisting masses of flesh that held me, and then felt my arms gripped also, felt myself being carried toward the door. The next moment I had been swung smoothly down to the metal floor below and released there, standing panting with my two companions while our strange captors surveyed us. Several of them held in pseudopod arms little square boxes of metal which they held toward us, and one of them, as if for an object lesson, turned his toward a little pile of metal bars not far away, and touched a switch in its handle. Instantly a narrow little jet of what resembled thick blue smoke sprang out of the thing toward the pile of bars, and as it touched them I saw them instantly crumbling and disintegrating like sugar in water, disappearing entirely in a moment. The meaning of the action was plain enough, and with a half-dozen of the deadly things trained full upon us we gave up all thoughts of a dash back to the cruiser.

Now the foremost of the creatures seemed to undergo a series of swift changes in shape, his plastic body twisting and changing from one strange form to another with inconceivable rapidity. After a moment of this protean changing his body settled back into its former shapeless mass, but as it did so three of the creatures behind him came forward toward us, as though in answer to a silent command. I was later to learn, what I half guessed at the moment, that it was by these swift changes in bodily shape that the creatures communicated with each other, each such change, however slight, carrying to them as much meaning as a change of accent in spoken speech does to us.

The three that had come forward each held in a pseudopod arm one of the deadly box-weapons, and now they placed themselves around us, one in front and the other two behind us. Then they motioned eloquently toward the left, and after a moment's hesitation we set off in that direction, around the clearing's edge. Past the looming machines

we went, my own eyes intent on the huge cylinder in the clearing beside us, from which arose the great ray of impenetrable force into which our ship had crashed. Through the twilight that reigned about us I saw that only a handful of these nebula-creatures were to be seen on all the pit's floor, and wondered momentarily at the smallness of their numbers. Then my speculations were driven from my mind as our guards suddenly halted us, several hundred feet around the clearing's edge from our cruiser.

Before us there yawned a round, dark opening in the smooth floor, a small, shaftlike pit some ten feet in diameter, its sides disappearing down into a dense darkness. As we stared, the guard before us glided to the shaft's edge and suddenly swung himself over that edge, disappearing from view. And as we stepped closer we saw that he was lowering himself down the shaft's smooth metal wall by means of metal pegs inset every few feet in that wall, dropping from peg to peg in smooth, effortless descent. Now our two remaining guards raised their weapons significantly, motioning toward the shaft. Choice of action there was none, so after a moment's involuntary hesitation I stepped to the edge and grasped the highest peg, swinging myself over the edge and down until I had found a foot-hold on a lower peg, then shifting my grasp to swing down again in the same manner. After me came Jor Dahat, and after him the plant-man Sar Than, who swung easily down by grasping the pegs with all of his four limbs. Then the two guards were swinging down after him, and we were dropping steadily down the line of pegs into the rayless darkness.

I THINK now that of all the journeys in the universe that journey of ours down the shaft was the strangest. Plant-man and human and Arcturian, three different beings from three far-distant stars, we swung down that dizzy ladder into the dark depths of this strange world at the fiery nebula's heart, guarded above and below by formless beings of weirdness unutterable. Down we clambered, feeling blindly in the darkness for our hand and foot-holds, down until at last, far below, there appeared a faint little spot of white light in the darkness.

The spot of light grew stronger, larger, as we climbed down toward it, until finally we saw that we were nearing the shaft's bottom, at which it gleamed. A few minutes more and we had clambered down the last peg and stood at the bottom of the shaft, a dark, circular well of metal pierced in one side by a doorway through which came the dim white light. Then we were bunched together once more between our guards, and were marched through the door into a long corridor dimly lit by a few globes of lambent white light suspended from its ceiling. As we marched along this long, metal-walled corridor I wondered how far beneath the great pit's floor we were, estimating by the length of our downward climb that it must be thousands of feet, at least. Then my thoughts shifted as there came from ahead a deep humming, beating sound, and a gleam of stronger light.

Before us now lay the end of the corridor, a square of brilliant white light toward which we were marching. We reached it, were passing through it, and then we halted in our tracks in sheer, stunned astonishment. For before us there stretched a vast open space, or cavern, of gigantic dimensions, its floor and sides and ceiling of smooth black metal, brilliantly illuminated by scores of the lambent globes of light. For thousands of feet before and above us stretched the great space, and in it was a scene of clamorous

activity that was stunning after the darkness and silence through which we had come.

Ranged on the mighty cavern's floor were long rows of machines the purposes of which were beyond our speculation, incredibly intricate masses of great arms and cogs and eccentric wheels all working smoothly with a steady beat-beat-beat of power, and tended by countless numbers of the formless nebula-creatures among them. Some seemed to be ventilating-machines of a sort, with great tubes leading upward through the cavern's ceiling; from others streams of white-hot metal gushed out into molds, cooling instantly into wheels and squares and bars; still others appeared to be connected with the great globes of light above; and some there were, like great domed turtles of metal, that moved here and there about the cavern's floor, reaching forth great pincer-arms to grip stacks of bars and plates and carry them from place to place.

Only a moment we stared across that scene of amazing activity before our guards were again motioning us onward, across the cavern's floor. Between the aisles of looming mechanisms we marched, whose formless attendants seemed not to heed us as we passed them. Before and around us glided the great turtle-machines with their burdens, the humming of their operation adding to the medley of sounds about us, only the shapeless nebula-creatures being completely silent. And as we marched on I saw in the great cavern's distant walls doors and corridors leading away to other vast brilliant-lit caverns that I could but vaguely glimpse, extending away in every direction, a great, half-seen vista of mighty white-lit spaces reaching away all about us, stupendous, incredible. And as we went on we saw other narrow shafts in the floor like that down which we had come, saw swarms of the nebula-creatures rising from and descending into those shafts by the pegs set in their sides, moving ceaselessly up and down from whatever other vast spaces might lie beneath us in this titanic, honeycombed world.

At last we were across the great cavern, had entered the comparative silence of another corridor, and progressed down this until our guards turned us through a doorway in its right wall. We found ourselves in a great hall, or room, smaller by far than any of the vast caverns that honeycombed this world, but unlike them quite silent, and with no humming machines or busy attendants. The great, long hall, perhaps five hundred feet in length, was quite empty except for a low dais at its farther end, toward which our guards conducted us, gliding before and behind us.

As we neared it we saw that on each side of the dais was ranged a double file of guards, each armed with the deadly weapon we had seen demonstrated, while upon the dais itself rested ten of the formless nebula-creatures. Of these ten, nine were like all of the others that we had seen, ranged in a single line across the dais. The tenth, however, who rested in a central position in front of the nine, was like the others in form or formlessness alone, being at least five times larger in size than any of the others we had seen, an enormous mass of white flesh resting there on the dais and contemplating us with his strange eye as we were marched down the hall toward him. I divined instantly, by his strange size and prominent position, that he held some place of power above the others of his race. For weird and alien as his appearance was, there yet reached out from him toward us a strong impression of some strange majesty and power embodied in this monstrous mass of flesh, some awe-inspiring dignity that was truly

regal, and that transcended all differences of mind or shape.

In a moment we had been halted before the dais, and then one of our guards glided forward, the mass of flesh that was his body twisting and changing with lightning-like swiftness in the strange communication of these creatures. I had no doubt that he was explaining our capture, and when he glided back the great creature on the dais contemplated us for a time in motionless silence. Then his own body writhed suddenly in protean change, in silent speech, and instantly one of the nine creatures behind him glided from the dais and through a small door in the wall behind it, reappearing in a moment with a complicated little apparatus in his grasp.

This was a small black box from which slender cords led to two shining little plates of metal. One of the plates he placed upon the body of the great nebula king, directly beneath the strange eye, where it seemed to adhere instantly. Then, after pausing a moment, he glided toward Jor Dahat with the other plate. The plant-man shrank back at his approach, but as the guards around us raised their weapons he subsided, allowing the creature to place the plate upon his own body beneath the head, where it also adhered. This done, the creature moved back to the little box and touched a series of switches upon it.

Instantly a slight whining sound rose from the box while a little globe on its surface flashed into blinding blue light. The great nebula ruler on the dais did not move, nor did Jor Dahat, though I saw his face grow blank, perplexed. For minutes the little mechanism hummed, and then, at a swift writhing order from the monster on the dais the thing was switched off. A moment the nebula king seemed to pause, then gave another silent order, and this time the creature at the box snapped on another series of switches, the globe upon it flashing into yellow light this time.

As it did so I saw Jor Dahat's eyes widening and starting, his whole body reacting as from an electric shock. His whole attitude, as the little apparatus hummed on, was that of one who listens to incredible things, his face a sudden mask of horror. Then suddenly he uttered a strangled cry, tore the metal plate from his body, and before any could guess his intention or prevent him had hurled himself with a mad shout straight at the nebula king!

4

THE moment that followed lives in my memory as one of lightning action. The very unexpectedness of Jor Dahat's mad attack was all that saved him, for before the massed guards about us could turn their deadly weapons on the plant-man he was upon the dais and the great creature there, whirling across the platform with him in wild conflict. Instantly Sar Than and I had leaped up to his side, glimpsing in that moment a half-dozen great pseudopod arms form suddenly out of the monster with whom the plant-man battled, wrapping themselves around him with swift force. Then, before we two could reach his side, we had been gripped ourselves by the guards on either side of us.

A moment we struggled madly in the remorseless grip of those powerful arms, then desisted as we saw others of the guards grasp Jor Dahat and pull him down from the dais beside us, wrenching him loose from his hold on his opponent. Then we three faced our captors once more, panting and disheveled, while from the dais the great nebula ruler again surveyed us. I looked for instant death as a result of that wild attack upon him, but whether the creature intended to reserve his revenge for later, or whether there was in that

cool and alien mind nothing so human as a desire for revenge, he did not order our deaths at that moment. His body spun again in silent speech, and as it ceased a half-dozen of the guards surrounded us and marched us back down the great hall and into the dim-lit corridor outside.

Instead of conducting us back down that corridor toward the giant cavern through which we had come, though, they led us in the opposite direction. A thousand feet or more we were marched, and then the corridor widened, while on either side of us now we made out holes in its floor, round shafts like that down which we had come from above. In the sides of these shafts, though, were no peg ladders, and we saw that the depth of each was only some twenty-five to thirty feet. While we wondered at their purpose our guards suddenly halted us before one of them, and then, taking a flexible little metal ladder from a recess in the wall, lowered it into the metal wall and motioned us to descend. Slowly we clambered down, and when the three of us had reached the well's bottom the ladder was at once drawn up. Then came the rustling sound of the guards above, gliding back down the corridor, except for a single one apparently left to guard us, who moved ceaselessly back and forth above.

Silently we gazed at each other, then about our strange prison cell. Even in the dim half-light of the corridor we could see that it was quite unescapable, its smooth perpendicular walls without projection of any kind. Even the nebula-creatures themselves, for whom these strange cells must have been designed, could not have escaped them, so there was small enough chance of our doing so. Without speaking we slumped to the floor of our well-prison, and for a time there was a dull silence there, broken only by the rustling glide of the single guard above.

At last the stillness was broken by the voice of Jor Dahat, who had been gazing moodily toward the wall. "Prisoners, here," he said slowly. "The one place of all places from which there is no escape."

I shook my head. "It seems the end," I admitted, dully. "We can't escape from this place, and if we could there's no time left to do anything, now."

The plant-man nodded, glancing at the time-dial on his wrist. "But twelve hours more," he said, "before the end—before the break-up of the nebula, the cosmic cataclysm that will wreck our universe. And these things who are our captors, these shapeless nebula-creatures, responsible for that break-up, that cataclysm——"

We stared at him in amazement, and he was silent for a moment, then speaking slowly on. "I know," he said darkly. "There in the hall of the nebula king I learned—what we came to learn. You saw them put those plates upon him and me, saw that apparatus? Well, it is in reality a thought-transmission apparatus, one which can transfer those vibrations of the brain which we call thought, those mind-pictures, from one mind to another. When it was first turned on I felt my senses leaving me, my brain a blank. I stood there, my knowledge, my memories, my ideas, being pumped out of me like water from a well, into the brain of that monstrous ruler there. He must have learned, in those few moments, all of my own knowledge of the universe outside the nebula, all of our own plans in coming to this place. And then, at his order, the machine was reversed, and thoughts, pictures, flowed through it from his brain to mine.

"It must have been from a sheer desire to overawe and terrify me that the creature sent his thoughts into my brain. I know that the moment it was turned on I became conscious

of ideas, thoughts, pictures, rushing into my mind, of new knowledge springing whole into my brain. Much there was that was blank and dark, ideas, no doubt, for which my own intelligence had no equivalent; but enough came to me so that I realized at last who and what these creatures were, and what their part was in whirling the nebula on to its break-up, and our doom.

"I knew, with never a doubt, that this great open space at the nebula's heart had been formed because the denser portions of its interior had contracted faster than the outer portions. As you know, all nebulæ contract with the passage of time, their fiery gases condensing to form great blazing stars, the eon-old cycle of stellar evolution, from fiery nebula to flaming sun. In this cycle this great nebula followed, but because of its vast size the inner, denser portions had contracted with much greater speed than the outer parts, forming a great solid world, in time, while the outer parts were still but fiery gas. This solid world spun at the center of the great space formerly occupied by the gases that had contracted to form it, and it was warmed and lit eternally by the encircling fires of the nebula all around it, and shut off from the outside universe by those fires.

"Light and warmth had this world in plenty, therefore, and with time life had risen on it, crude forms ascending through the channels of evolutionary change into a myriad different species, of which one species, the nebula-creatures we have seen, was the most intelligent. In time they ruled this strange world, wiping out all other species, and climbed to greater and greater science and power with the passage of time, their existence never suspected by any in the universe outside. Back and forth through the Galaxy went the great star-cruisers of the federated suns, but none ever dreamed of the strange race that had grown to power on this world at the fiery nebula's heart.

"But slowly, inexorably, destruction began to creep upon that race. As I have said, all nebulæ contract always, and this one was still doing so, still growing smaller and smaller, its encircling fires closing steadily in upon the spinning world at their heart. Hotter and hotter it became on that world until life was hardly possible on it for the nebula-creatures, accustomed as they were to a milder temperature. They must escape that heat or perish, and since they could not escape to outer space through the prisoning fires around them they did the last thing available, hollowed out vast caverns in the interior of their world and descended into those caverns to live. The whole surface of their world they sheathed with smooth, heat-reflecting metal, and then descended in all their hordes into the countless mighty caverns that honeycombed all their great world, taking up their life again in those cool depths, safe from the nebula's heat.

"Ages passed over them while they lived thus in their world's depths, but still the nebula contracted, closed in upon them, in that vast, remorseless cycle that is nature's law throughout the universe. Closer and closer crept its fires toward the metal-sheathed world of the nebula people, until at last they saw that soon those fires would envelop their world and annihilate it, unless they were turned back in some way. So for a time they bent all their energies toward the problem of turning back the nebula's contracting fires, and at last found a way to do so, one which would take all their strength and science to carry out.

"In the surface of their metal-covered world they sank a vast, metal-walled pit, and in that pit set massed machines capable of generating an atomic ray of terrific power.

From each of the generating-machines led a connection carrying the power produced by it, all these connections combining into the thick cable we saw which leads into the great cylinder-apparatus, generating inside it the mighty ray that stabs up toward the nebula, and into which we crashed. Now the great world here at the nebula's heart is already spinning, revolving, and the purpose of the nebula people was to use the great ray as a connection between their spinning world and the encircling nebula, to set the nebula to spinning also by this means, the ray being equal to a solid connection between the two. And their plan proved a sound one, for after the great ray had been put into operation the vast encircling nebula began to move slowly, to revolve, faster and faster as its turning accelerated under the constant impetus of the great ray.

"When the nebula should reach a certain speed of whirl, the nebula-creatures knew, when it should reach the critical point of its spin, it would be whirling so fast that it would not longer be able to hold its mighty mass together, and it would break up, disintegrate, its fiery mass flying off through the Galaxy in all directions. This would remove all danger from the nebula people, who could then live on without fear in their cavern-honeycombed world, using artificial light and heat. They knew, however, that once started the whirling of the nebula must be kept up until it had reached its critical point and had broken up, since if the whirling were slackened before then, the great ray turned off, the vast, ponderously turning nebula would collapse with the removal of the ray, its collapsing fires annihilating the nebula world inside it. For this reason the great machines in the pit that generated the power for the ray were made completely automatic and certain in operation, needing only a handful of the nebula-creatures to attend them.

"It was that handful that captured us when we came, our ship falling down to the great pit's floor after crashing into the terrific ray. And after we had been brought down here, after I had learned thus what terrible plan of these creatures it was that was bringing doom to our own universe, I lost my senses, sprang at the nebula king, unconscious of all but what I had just learned. And now you know what it was I learned, what we came here to learn. But we have learned too late, now, for in less than twenty hours the nebula's whirling will have reached its critical point, will have sent its vast flaming mass hurtling out across our universe, our Galaxy, in all directions, to carry destruction and death to all the peoples of our suns and worlds!"

THE silence of our shaft-cell was suddenly heavy and brooding as the voice of Jor Dahat ceased. From above came the soft rustling of the guard there, gliding back and forth along the dim corridor, and faintly to our ears from the distant vast caverns came the clash and hum of the great machines there, with all their clamor of activity. At last, as though from a distance, I heard my own voice break the silence.

"Twelve hours," I said slowly. "Twelve hours—before the end." Then I, too, fell silent, and silently, hopelessly, we stared into each other's eyes.

Through the hours that followed, the same deathly silence hung over us, a silence intensified by the thing in all our thoughts, a silence deafening as the rumble of doom. Always now that scene comes back to me in memory as a strange, dim-lit picture—the dusky little well at the bottom of which we crouched, hardly able to make out each others' faces, the ceaseless humming activity from the great

caverns beyond, the measured glide of our guard above. Hour passed into hour and we moved not, changed not, sitting on in dull, despairing silence. At last, weary as I was, I drifted off into restless sleep, tortured by vague dreams of the horrors through which we had come.

When I opened my eyes again it was to find Jor Dahat gently shaking me, crouched there beside me. As he saw me wake he bent his head to my ear. "Sar Than has a plan," he whispered to me. "We've hardly more than an hour left but he thinks that we have a chance that way to get out—a million to one chance. If we could——"

But by that time I was crawling over to the Arcturian's side, and eagerly we listened while in whispers he outlined his project for escaping from our pit-cell. Small enough chance there seemed that we could carry it out, and even were we to escape from our well-prison there seemed nothing but death awaiting us farther on, but we were of one mind that it would be better to meet our end thus than wait in the shaft tamely for death. Therefore, crouching against the wall, we waited tensely for the guard above to pass our shaft.

Pass he did, in a moment more, his monstrous shapeless body gliding to the shaft's edge and peering down there at us in passing, as usual. Then he was gone, gliding on down the corridor, and instantly we sprang to our feet. At once Jor Dahat stepped over to the wall, standing with his back against it and his feet braced widely on the floor. Then Sar Than climbed nimbly up over the plant-man's body until two of his four limbs rested on the shoulders of Jor Dahat, who now grasped those two limbs in his own hands and raised them as high as he could reach, holding the Arcturian above him by the sheer force of his powerful muscles.

With his other two limbs Sar Than also was reaching upward and now I clambered up in turn, over the plant-man and the Arcturian, until the latter, grasping my own feet, had raised me in turn as high as he could reach. Thus upheld I was just able to reach the shaft's rim above with my upstretched hands, and there, in that precarious position, we awaited the return of the guard.

It could hardly have been more than a minute, at most, that we waited, but to ourselves, balancing there with muscles strained to the utmost, it seemed an eternity. I heard the rustling glide of the guard's approach, now, but at the same time felt the Arcturian's hold giving, beneath me, heard the great muscles of the plant-man cracking beneath the weight of both of us. I knew that my two companions could hold out for but a moment longer, and then, just as the Arcturian's grip on my feet began to slip, the returning guard had reached the pit's edge, pausing there, directly above me, to peer down as usual. The next moment I had reached up with a last effort and had gripped him, and then we four were tumbling down into the well, pulling the guard down with us.

As we fell I had heard his weapon rattle on the floor above, knocked from his grasp, but as we reached the well's floor he had already gripped us with a half-dozen pseudopod-arms that formed themselves lightninglike out of the shapeless mass of flesh that was his body. Then we were plunging about the floor of the well in a mad, weird battle, as silent as it was deadly.

The thing could not cry out for help, but for the moment it seemed to us that alone it might conquer us, its suddenly formed arms coiling swiftly about us, great tentacles of muscle that were like to have choked us in the first moment of combat. Strike and grasp as we would there seemed no vulnerable spot on the creature's slippery body, and weary as we were the outcome of the struggle was for a

time extremely doubtful. I heard Sar Than utter a strangled cry as a thick arm noosed itself about his body, felt another striving for a hold on my own head, and then saw Jor Dahat suddenly grasp two of the slippery arms and literally tear the thing's shapeless body into half with those two holds. There was a soft ripping sound and then the creature had slumped to the floor, a limp mass of dead flesh.

A moment we stared breathlessly at each other over the dead thing, then without speaking sprang to the wall, where Jor Dahat braced himself to repeat our former procedure. In a moment he had raised the Arcturian above him, and within another moment Sar Than was raising me likewise until I had again gained a grip on the rim of the shaft above. A fierce struggling effort and I had pulled myself up to the floor of the dim-lit corridor, where I lay panting for a moment, then leapt to my feet and over to the recess in the wall from which I had seen the flexible ladder taken. A moment I pawed frantically in the recess, then uttered a sob as my fingers encountered the cold metal of the ladder. It was but the work of an instant to lower it into the well for my two companions to climb up, and then we gazed tensely about us.

The long, dim-lit corridor was quite empty for the moment, though away down its length we glimpsed the square of white light that marked the point where it debouched into the great caverns. That was our path, we knew; so down the corridor we ran, between the rows of shaft-cells on either side, until we were just passing between the last two of those shafts and were reaching the point where the corridor narrowed once more. And then we suddenly stopped short, stood motionless; for, not a hundred yards ahead, a double file of the nebula guards had suddenly issued from a door in the corridor's wall, and were gliding straight down its length toward us!

5

For a single moment death stared us in the face, and we stood there motionless, stupefied with terror. As yet the guards approaching us seemed not to have glimpsed us, owing to the corridor's dim light, but with every moment they were drawing nearer and it was but a matter of seconds before we would be seen and slain. Then, before we had recovered from our stupefaction, Sar Than had jerked us sidewise toward one of the last shaft-cells in the floor that we had just passed.

"Down here!" he cried, pointing into its dark depths. "Down here until they pass!"

In a flash we saw that his idea was indeed our last chance, and at once lowered ourselves over the dark shaft's rim, hanging from its edge with hands gripped on that edge.

We had not been too soon; for a few seconds later there came the rustling sound of the guards passing above, gliding down the corridor past our place of concealment. As they glided by we hung in an agony of suspense, hoping against hope that they would not glimpse our hands on the pit's rim, or notice the absence of the creature left to guard us. There was a long, tense minute of waiting, and then they were past. We hung for a few moments longer, with aching muscles, then drew ourselves up to the corridor's floor once more and started down its length toward the square of white brilliance in the distance.

Down the dim-lit corridor we ran, past open doors in its walls through which we glimpsed great halls and branching passageways, all seeming for the moment deserted. A few moments later we had reached the corridor's end, and were peering out into the gigantic, white-lit space that lay beyond, a space alive and clamorous with the same multifarious activ-

ity as when we had come through it. To venture out into that great place of humming machines and thronging nebula-creatures was to court instant death, we knew, yet it must be crossed to gain the single shaft that led upward. Then, while we still hesitated, I uttered a whispered exclamation and pointed to something in the shadows beside us, something big and round that lay just inside the broad corridor's dusk, and that gleamed faintly in the dim light. In a moment we were beside it, and found it to be one of the great turtle-machines that swarmed across the floors of the vast caverns beyond us, though this one was unoccupied, its round door open to expose the hollow interior of the dome.

"There's our way out!" I cried. "There's room in it for the three of us!"

Within another moment we were inside it, crouching together in the cramped space of the interior and swinging shut the little door. I found that a narrow slit running around the dome allowed us to look forth, and that a little circle of switches grouped around a single large lever were evidently its controls. Swiftly I pressed these switches in a series of combinations, and then there came a welcome hum of power from beneath and we were gliding smoothly out of the shadowy corridor into the full glare of the thronging, white-lit cavern, my hand on the central lever guiding our progress.

Tensely we crouched in our humming vehicle as it moved smoothly across the cavern, between the rows of great machines, toward the corridor opening in the opposite wall. The thronging nebula-creatures about us paid us no attention whatever, taking us for but one of the scores of turtle-machines that were busy about us. Hearts beating high with our success we glided on toward the dark wall-opening that was our goal. A score of feet from it we suddenly held our breath as another of the turtle-machines collided suddenly with our own, but in a moment it had glided away and in another moment we were again in the shadows of a dim-lit corridor, gliding down its length toward the shaft that led upward.

We reached the corridor's end, sprang out of our machine and through the door into the well-like bottom of the shaft. At once the plant-man was clambering up the peg-ladder, followed by the Arcturian with myself last. Up, up we climbed, putting all our strength into the effort, for we knew that not many minutes remained for action. Then suddenly as I looked down I stopped and breathed an exclamation; for standing at the bottom of the shaft were two of the nebula-creatures, not more than a hundred feet below us—two white masses of flesh that were staring up toward us.

A moment we hung motionless on the pegs, while the two weird beings gazed up, and then we saw one of them glide back into the corridor, racing back to the great caverns to sound the alarm, we knew. The other gazed up at us once more and then, to our horror, began to climb swiftly up after us.

I THINK now that of all that befell us there in the nebula world the moments that followed were the most agonizing. Swinging ourselves up by sheer muscular power, from peg to peg, we clambered up that giddy ladder, through a darkness impossible of description. Somewhere in that darkness below me, I knew, the nebula-creature that pursued us was swinging up after me, and I knew that to such a creature the negotiating of this dizzy ladder was child's play. Yet, spurred on by deadly fear, I struggled upward with superhuman speed, a hundred feet, another hundred, until a hope flashed across my brain that the thing that pursued us might have given up that pursuit.

Then above us I glimpsed a little dot of glowing light, knew it for the shaft's mouth far above. And at the same moment that I glimpsed it, I felt a tug on my ankles, a powerful arm fasten round my body, and knew that the pursuing creature had reached me.

I cried out involuntarily as I felt my feet twitched off the pegs on which they had rested, and dangled for a moment there by my hands while the creature below me tightened his grip on my feet and began to pull me steadily downward. All his force he must have put into that effort, and I felt my hands slipping on the peg which they held, knew that once I lost my hand-grip the creature below would release my feet also and send me hurtling down to death on the shaft's floor far below. In a deathly silence I hung there, striving against that deadly pull, and then felt one of my hands torn from its grip, felt the fingers of the other slipping on the peg they held, felt my will relaxing——

Then someone had suddenly swung down past me from above, and I glanced down to glimpse in the dim light from above Sar Than, swinging swiftly down past me and hanging by one of his powerful limbs while with the other three he grasped the creature below me. Instantly the latter's grip on my feet relaxed, there was an instant of swift scuffling below me, and then I glimpsed the shapeless body of the nebula-creature forced from its hold on the pegs, hurtling down into the darkness to strike the floor far below with a smacking thud. The next instant Sar Than was up to me and was pulling me up until I again clung safely to the pegs. Only the Arcturian, with his four strange limbs, could ever have successfully battled the nebula-creature thus on that giddy ladder of pegs.

But now we were again clambering up, calling on all our strength to bear us on, watching the little circle of dim light above broadening as we climbed up toward it. Below us, we knew, the alarm had been given, and within a few minutes now a horde of the nebula-creatures would be rushing up the shaft. And but minutes were left for us to act in, so that we put every effort into a mad burst of speed that within a few more minutes had brought us up to the shaft's mouth.

JOR DAHAT, above us, was the first to reach its level, and I saw the plant-man raise his head and peer cautiously forth, then beckon us upward. Silently, stealthily, we climbed up, crept over the shaft's edge until we crouched on the smooth metal floor. The scene about us was the same as before, the vast, metal-walled pit, the massed machines around us, the great cylinder at the clearing's center from which arose the livid ray, the long shape of our battered cruiser lying beyond it. A half-dozen of the nebula-creatures were gathered near the great cylinder, and we saw their bodies twisting in their silent speech, but their strange eyes were not turned in our direction.

In a moment Jor Dahat crept silently to one side, where lay a mass of tools, and came back with three heavy, axlike implements of metal in his grasp, long-handled and broad-bladed. Silently he handed one of these to each of us, and then without words we crawled silently toward the gathered nebula-creatures, on hands and knees. Inch by inch, foot by foot, we crept toward them. I looked up, once, saw the glowing fires of the nebula far above us, knew that within minutes those fires would be flying out through our universe in flaming destruction unless we could act. My grip tightened on my weapon as we crawled on through the shadowy dusk, and then suddenly one of the creatures before us had turned and was gazing straight toward us.

Before he could turn to his companions in warning, before he could

(Continued on page 717)

"His hands were extended, and his entire body seemed to be thrusting something away."

"I HAVE never read," remarked Arthur Marl, "a true horror story."

We who were with him in a corner of the club-house looked at him in surprize.

"Why, you've been making a study of Gothic literature for twenty years or more. You surely must have read *some*," a member replied.

"Of course."

"Then why did you say you hadn't?"

"I didn't."

We looked at him, puzzled.

"For heaven's sake, will you kindly explain yourself?" some one demanded.

"The thing is obvious, or ought to be. I said I had read no *true* horror story, though I have read many which seemed so for a moment."

"What's the difference?"

"This: The best stories of the type called 'Gothic' may affect a person temporarily; some may even give him nightmares if he is of a nervous temperament, but this does not necessarily mean that they are true horror tales."

"It depends on what you mean by a 'horror' story," someone remarked.

"Exactly. And can you tell me what a tale of horror is?"

"One that makes your spine crawl——"

"One that, if read at night while alone, will make you jump for bed——"

"One that will make you afraid of the night——"

"One that you can't recall except with a shiver——"

"One that you won't want to recall——"

Arthur quelled the babel. "You all are partly right."

"What's your own definition?" asked somebody.

He thought for a moment; then he replied:

"What I say will apply only to those who have more than a passing acquaintance with Gothic literature. One who reads but little and has never come across more than one or two specimens of the macabre will naturally have received a much deeper impression from those stories than would one who is familiar with the type. The more tales of terror you read, the more inured you become. There is always the thrill of the first few horror stories, of course, but indifference comes quickly. Life is so comprehensive that little can be new; but the unknown, the utterly unknown, is the essence of terror.

"I have made a study of this field for twenty years or so. My collection of such books and manuscripts, as you know, is one of the best—perhaps the only ambitious one—in existence. A taste for the gruesome, once acquired, is unappeasable, but although my library contains thousands of these volumes, there is not one among them which I consider a true Gothic romance.

"A tale of horror is one which begins on a low key of foreboding and rises steadily and rapidly like the howl of a wolf until words of awful imagery twist across the dead pages in a stream of terror; a tale that begins in shadow and passes into darkness until an utter blackness filled with Things surges about the reader; a tale that preys on the mind, that destroys all but one central part and wraps itself around that part on which to feed.

"As I said, there is no such story in all my collection. I have obtained many books famed as being horrible, but they all lack something, or at best have only a temporary effect. *The Monk* in reality does not belong to the class; *Melmoth* is more properly an adventure novel; *The Vampyre* is as good as its progeny *Dracula,* but vampires are becoming common; *Frankenstein* is famous mainly because it was one of the first Gothic romances; Benson is often too definite; Poe is the master, of course, though Lovecraft is now writing terrific tales.

"You see, if an author makes his story too definite, it descends to the ordinary or becomes either disgusting or ridiculous, depending on how far he goes. Thus, Wells' *The Cone* is disgusting, as are tales of cannibalism and torture. Physical pain is ephemeral; it comes to an end. The mind can not be greatly affected by finite or material things, because it is acquainted with them. It needs a tale of hints and whispers that it can develop unlimitedly."

We were silent for a moment, but some one broke out, "Do you expect ever to read such a story?"

"Perhaps," was his only reply.

2

I BELIEVE it was two days later that Arthur took me into his confidence. He did not mention the tale to anyone else, but he told me about it because I myself was quite fond of Gothic literature.

"There is now on its way to me a manuscript from an agent in India," he said. "It was purchased from a native who had stolen it from a collection of ancient writings somewhere in the north; exactly where, I don't know. My agent could make little of it, but the native claimed that it had passed into evil legend. I have found a reference to the manuscript in a Sanskrit fragment over three thousand years old. Even there it is described as being of unknown age.

"Think of it!" he half whispered to me. "It was written perhaps a hundred or more centuries ago! I believe, from the translation of the Sanskrit fragment, that it will be the key to the forgotten past. For, ages ago, the fragment states, there arose somewhere in the northern part of India, or beyond the Himalayas, a civilization of the highest type among a band of people completely isolated from the rest of their kind. But they all were madmen—maniacs! They were countless centuries ahead of their time, but they were insane! They lived in the days when the world was still young, and they had access to forces which have passed with the waning of the earth. And because they were mad, they had those forces more readily at their control."

His eyes were gleaming brighter. "They developed an advanced, but a mad and perverted civilization, with the aid of those evil forces. Their architecture was strange and fantastic; their art was a thing of shadows, the reflection of their madness and their servants; their literature was the key to all ancient mysteries, the portal to the entities which have remained hidden for epochs and are now remembered only as myths, legends, and fabled lore. They had at their call terrific implements of power and destruction in those Evil Ones; they kept that secret in their literature. But with the coming of a now unknown doom, the entire country was ravaged, the cities became heaps of dust, the inhabitants were wiped out, and all their work was obliterated, except one small group of books. And of that group the only manuscript extant is the one I shall receive, written by a madman whose every thought was inspired by the ravening Things inseparably connected with the Country of the Mad, and giving somewhere in it the key to what the world has forgotten!"

I was inflamed, of course, by this extraordinary narrative, and eager to know more. A torrent of questions burst from me, but Arthur had told me all he knew. He suggested that I come over, however, when the manuscript had arrived.

I did not see him in the meantime, but when he notified me a couple of weeks later that he had received the manuscript, I immediately hastened over.

Never before had I seen him so excited. His eyes shone and gleamed steadily. He was nervous, and not only were his old mannerisms intensified, but he had picked up a dozen new ones. His voice had an unusual tone, an unsteadiness.

"Come in. The manuscript's here."

I followed him inside and we walked to the rooms containing his library. A large table covered with books stood in the middle of one room. He motioned me toward it. All the volumes were ancient and musty; some were riddled with worm-holes, some had damp-stains and mold-spots, while others had faded or discolored leaves.

"Here it is," he said, pointing before him.

It was almost with awe that I looked at the manuscript. The leaves of it were fastened between old and worn covers of ivory that once had been inscribed with strange, gold symbols. The characters within, on parchment of great age, were totally unfamiliar to me. Many of those near the margins had faded or had been thumbed to illegibility, but in the centers they were black and distinct. The writing was clear and in a fine hand. Yet the manuscript aroused in me an immediate distaste. Something about those ancient leaves with their black, unknown characters repelled me in a singular manner.

"In what language is it written?"

"I'm not sure," he replied slowly. "I have been comparing it with the

oldest of the Indian tongues, but it doesn't agree with any of them. It resembles Sanskrit most closely, and seems to bear the relation to it that Anglo-Saxon does to Modern English."

"Whew! It must be one of the oldest works in existence! Have you begun to decipher it yet?"

"I am just commencing the task, which I may not finish for weeks. But what a find! I think I have my tale at last!"

3

I DID not see him again until two months later, for I was out of town. The manuscript was not forgotten, however; on several occasions it came into my thoughts and I wondered how Arthur was progressing, or if it lived up to his hopes. But I heard nothing from him during the period, and it had faded somewhat into the background of memory by the time I returned.

The evening after I got back, I decided to call on Arthur. I dropped in at the club on my way to his home, thinking he might possibly be there. He wasn't. But I met an old friend and we chatted for a few minutes. As I left him, to continue my way, he remarked, "Sorry you're leaving so quickly. Is it a pressing engagement?"

"Well, not exactly," I replied. "I'm going to see if Arthur's home."

I have never seen the face of a man change as rapidly as his. For a brief instant his features altered, and there came into his face an expression of aversion, almost of fear. I looked at him in surprize. He pursed his lips as if to answer my unspoken question, but said nothing. Instead, he motioned me toward a corner.

For another minute he was silent, after we had seated ourselves, before asking, "When did you last see Arthur?"

"About two months ago. Why?"

He ignored my question and said, half to himself, "And you have known him as long as I."

"Longer. But what are you driving at?"

Again he ignored my question. "You will keep this to yourself?"

"Of course," I answered. I was beginning to feel slightly alarmed as well as puzzled. "But what's the matter?"

He seemed to be arranging his thoughts, when, in a moment, he began speaking. His face was almost expressionless, and he talked in a low tone which did not go beyond me, though I could hear him distinctly.

"Perhaps you can explain this. I can't, though I have spent a week on it. And I'm beginning to wonder if it will be explained. Well, I saw him a week ago, Tuesday to be exact. I had gone out to his house for the evening and intended to pass several hours there. Arthur lives alone, you know, and we would not be interrupted but should have the evening to ourselves, since it was the servant's night off.

"I arrived about half-past 7, and Arthur himself admitted me. One of the first things he did was to show me some recent additions to his queer library. He had acquired some Latin works on demonology, among them a rather gruesome Sixteenth Century volume that contained several of Brueghel the Elder's nightmare-compositions, engraved, I think, by Cock. There was also a manuscript of great age which evidently fascinated him. He handled it with a mixture of like and dislike for some minutes while we were looking at his new volumes, and seemed half reluctant, half glad, to leave it.

"When we left the books, we went to his den, or whatever he calls the room where he keeps his curios. And it was there that I was first struck by something—unusual—about his appearance. I had not noticed any-

thing different before we looked at the manuscript and the books, but I did now. There was nothing *definitely* wrong, but his eyes—you have noticed them? their sunkenness and depth?—well, they were lit curiously in a—*frightened*—sort of way. And he was nervous; he had picked up a number of mannerisms, and was so restless that I thought he must be suffering from overwork, or in need of a change. At times he fell into an abstraction, or gazed steadily at some vacant spot as if he saw something. Once he jerked his head around unexpectedly as if he thought someone was behind him. And that *frightened* look never left his eyes.

" 'You ought to take a vacation,' I remarked suddenly. 'You're wearing yourself out.'

" 'I know it,' he replied. 'Perhaps I will soon. I've been spending all my time translating the manuscript, and it was quite a strain. But I finished last night, so perhaps I won't need a rest.' "

He stopped, but almost immediately continued, as if anxious to complete his story.

"It was after 10, I believe, when Arthur stood up suddenly with an apology and a remark about books that I didn't quite catch and left the room. I amused myself glancing at some of the curios while I waited.

"Five minutes passed. I turned to the old guns on the wall and examined them. Ten minutes came, and I wondered at the delay. I looked at the curios another five minutes. Then I began to feel slightly puzzled. The room was silent, and my thoughts were coursing in strange channels. I began to listen in spite of myself, but no sound could be heard. Fancies began to intrude themselves into my mind and I became vaguely apprehensive. I could have sworn that the atmosphere of the room had changed. Then I felt oddly uncomfortable and restless. I began to imagine all kinds of things. I tried to forget them. I tried to discount them as mere imagination. I thrust them away. They kept coming back. There was absolutely no ground for fear or doubt, but I was really alarmed. Then I got angry with myself and stood still. But the silence oppressed me and I walked about the room again. I could not imagine what was wrong with me. I pulled out my watch. Over twenty minutes had elapsed, and Arthur was still gone.

" 'I'm an ass,' I cursed to myself, 'but I can't stand this any longer. He said something about books. I'll glance in his library, where he must be.'

"I left the room immediately and walked to the library, calling myself a fool as I walked. A light shone through the open door and I stepped in. I had guessed right. Arthur was standing near the middle of the room, with his back half toward me.

" 'I hope I'm not intruding,' I said, 'but I got restless and thought something might have happened to you.'

"He did not reply. Then I noticed that there was something curious in his attitude; he was swaying, as if about to fall. I saw him pass his arm across his forehead and eyes as I sprang to his side. As I reached him, he removed it. I met the full stare of eyes darkly liquid and suffering with a black horror.

" 'For God's sake!' he whispered. 'Brush them off!'

"I looked at him blankly. His eyes were fastened on some point in the air between us. He knew I was near, but apparently did not see me. 'Brush what off?'

" 'Quick!' he moaned, in a voice which had become husky and frantic. 'I can't do a thing! They won't obey me!'

"I stood motionless, too dumfounded for thought. His eyes had taken on an aspect of utter terror such as I have never believed possible in any human being.

"'My God!' he moaned in a low voice. He was silent for a moment. Then he caught his breath suddenly and gasped—and the gasp turned to a rising moan, the moan to one continuous terrible shriek. He clawed at his face. He whipped the air all around, taking short steps in every direction but stopping immediately as if he had hit something. His face was hellish and working convulsively—his hands now covered his head, now lashed about—and that fearful scream never ceased."

He paused, and his voice became steadier. After a few seconds, he continued.

"I got a basin of water, carried it back in a trice, and hurled it in his face. Why I did, I don't know, except that I had no physical strength compared with that then in him. But at the first shock of the cold water, he stood still, and his face changed. A puzzled look came into it; he abruptly became himself, and sank exhausted into a chair.

"'Thanks,' he said, with a faint, ghastly smile. 'My nerves are worse than I thought. I believe I shall take your advice.'"

4

I COME now to the last stage of that strange affair. That it may explain all is possible; that it will, I am not so sure. Perhaps Arthur Marl was insane, with a latent malady that had always afflicted him, or a sudden attack. But I saw the manuscript, and perhaps. . . .

It was getting dark when I left the club, but I decided to go to Arthur's residence at once, and hailed a cab. I thought over what I had heard, as I was carried toward his home, but I could make little of it. The one thing I was sure of was that the manuscript had something to do with the matter.

We drew up to his house, and I dismissed the cab. It was quite dark by now. A light was burning in the house, but, although I pushed the bell-button, I could not hear it ring, and no one answered. Then I remembered that this was the servant's night off. I decided to presume on our friendship as I had done many times before, and hence opened the door myself.

Since Arthur was usually in his library at this time, I wasted no more time but immediately went toward it. A dim light was burning there, but I could see no one. However, I turned the light on full before leaving, in order to make sure, and—on the floor lay Arthur Marl, long dead, his face set in a look of the most unutterable horror I have ever seen. His hands were extended, and his entire body seemed to be thrusting something away. Scattered near him were several small leaves of writing which I glanced at briefly and stuffed into my pocket.

It was not until an hour later that I got a chance to read them. I did what I could for Arthur, and made arrangements for proper treatment of the body. Once at my rooms, however, I hesitated no longer. I settled myself in a chair and spread out the leaves. They were mixed up, but even when I had arranged them they did not form a complete record, for the first pages, and some of the later, were missing.

And there, before the drowsy warmth of the fire, the room behind me darkened save for its dull glow, I read the leaves.

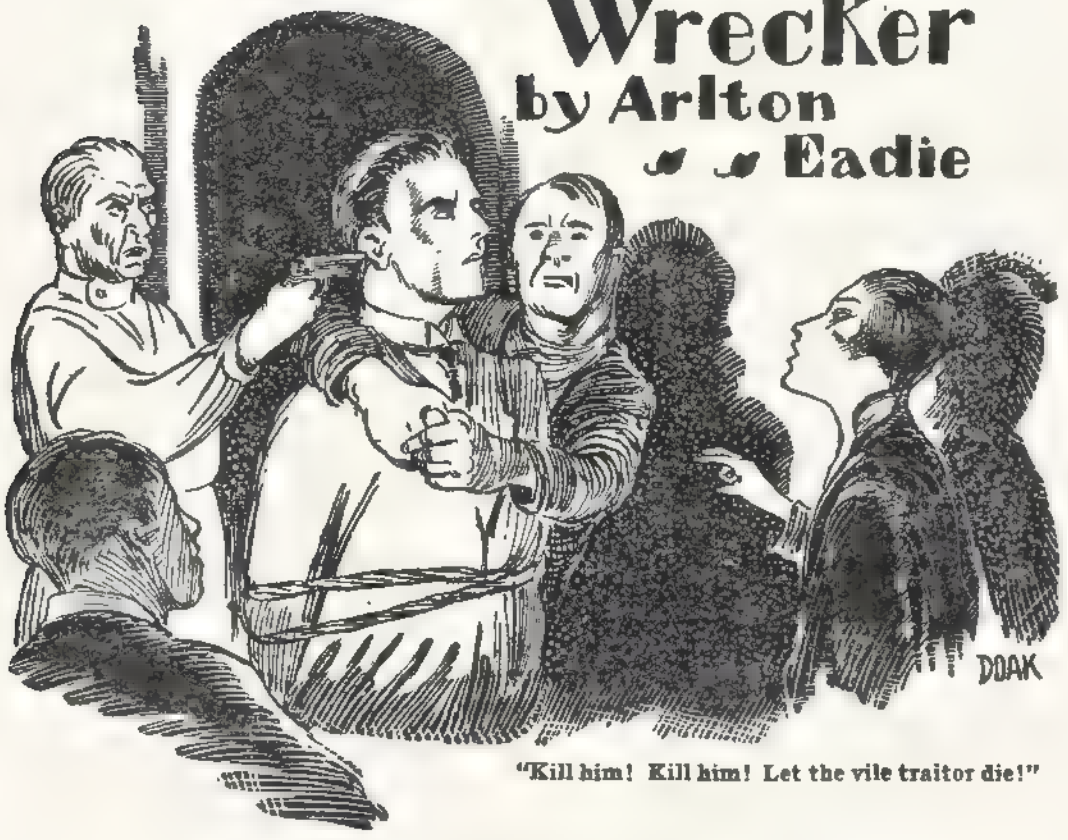
". . . And so there was a Country of the Mad long ago. That first allusion, then, was true, and the author right.

"7. I have now translated the rest of the ancient volume, and part of the history of that strange land lies before me. Was there ever a myth wilder than the tale of the Country of the Mad? Think of it! More than ten thousand years ago, that band of mad-

(Continued on page 716)

The World-Wrecker

by Arlton Eadie



"Kill him! Kill him! Let the vile traitor die!"

The Story Thus Far

FROM an unknown who signs himself "Autocrat of the World," the *Daily Wire* receives a communication for publication which threatens that, unless the present rulers recognize him as the Supreme Lawgiver of the World, he will destroy every living thing on its surface. This he is able to accomplish by means of an anti-gravitation gas which, he states, he has recognized in the spectra of the tails of various comets. Terry Hinton, a young reporter, is deputed to get the views of Professor Merrivale, an authority on the subject. He gathers the information from Alma Wexford, the professor's attractive secretary and assistant, that there is a possibility of the threat being carried out. Terry persuades Alma to allow him to examine Professor Merrivale's laboratory. While there, Terry is attacked by the professor; whereupon he denounces Merrivale as the unknown "Autocrat," only to be half-stunned by a flash of blinding light, and to have his weapon wrenched from his grasp as though by an invisible hand.

PROFESSOR MERRIVALE uttered a soft, purring laugh as his eyes played over the discomfited Terry.

"Next time it occurs to you to threaten me with a gun, I would advise you to do so elsewhere than in the vicinity of a powerful electro-magnet." He gave this piece of counsel in the tone of one who corrects a wayward child.

For a moment Terry's eyes, dazzled by the fierce electrical discharge, could distinguish nothing except the myriad of many-colored spots caused by the reaction of the retina. As his vision cleared, however, he became aware of the novel method by which he had been disarmed. By pressing the small switch fixed to the table, Merrivale had rendered active the large wire-bound magnet which stood a few feet away, and the attraction thus induced had drawn the revolver

This story began in WEIRD TALES for April

to its poles with irresistible force. Defeated though he was, he could not but admire the ingenuity with which the tables had been turned.

"The first trick goes to you, Professor," he admitted, shrugging.

Professor Merrivale bowed gravely.

"Thank you, Mr. Hinton. Not to be outdone in the bouquet-throwing line, I will admit that the trick was a fluke. And now may I ask what you are doing on my premises at this hour of the night?"

"Oh, I just dropped in to have a look at your wonderful observatory," said Terry easily.

"Any other object?"

"Yes." Terry had dropped all pretense and was looking him straight in the eyes. "I came to find the man who wants to be boss of the earth."

The professor's narrow shoulders shook with noiseless mirth.

"And have you succeeded in finding this most interesting personage?" he inquired blandly.

"You'll read the answer in tomorrow's *Daily Wire*," said Terry grimly.

Professor Merrivale slowly stroked his chin.

"Tomorrow . . . tomorrow. . . ." He repeated the words in a kind of dreamy abstraction. "A stickler for verbal accuracy might reply that 'tomorrow' never comes."

"It'll come for you, all right," Terry grinned cheerfully.

"Correct, Mr. Hinton. Tomorrow will undoubtedly come—but you may not live to see it!"

Merrivale snarled out the final words with sudden vehemence, at the same time making a peculiar sign with his hand. Instantly Terry was seized from behind by the servants who had crept unheard into the room. From the very number of his assailants he knew that an effective resistance was hopeless; yet he was not one to submit tamely.

His first move was certainly unexpected. A fighting man's instinct is usually to keep his feet, but Terry did the exact opposite. Slipping to the ground, he gripped the leg of one of his attackers, in an approved Rugby tackle, and with a swift shove sent him sprawling backward. A pistonlike right uppercut to the jaw, as he bent over Terry, sent another down. Then, ducking under the hands which hampered each other as they clawed at him, he broke loose and made for the door, only to pause when he found himself facing two more men who had just entered.

"You score again, Professor," he said philosophically, as he felt a rope being slipped over his shoulders, pinioning his arms to his sides. "But I should be glad to be enlightened as to the great idea underlying all this stuff."

Merrivale grinned venomously as he personally saw to the security of the knots.

"When an armed intruder enters the house of a citizen at midnight he must be prepared to undergo a little rough usage," he retorted. "As a midnight housebreaker——"

"Housebreaker nothing," snapped Terry. "I came in by the door."

The old man's features twisted into a smile of studied incredulity.

"Dear me, did you really? In that case you will have a witness to verify your statement?"

Terry nodded, and the other went on suavely.

"Possibly I may not be mistaken in thinking that the witness is my secretary, Miss Wexford? Ah, I thought so. Well, I will confront you with her, so that you may see how much—or how little—you may rely on her testimony to release you from the very embarrassing, and I fear also very dangerous, predicament into which you have fallen."

WITHOUT waiting for a reply, the old professor hurried from the room, leaving Terry considerably mystified by his words. During the

wait which followed, his captors eyed him in silence. Endowed with a brain that was ever quick to react to his surroundings, Terry fancied he could detect in their lowering glances a resentment far deeper than the average servant would evince toward a burglar, even one caught apparently red-handed. By far the most menacing was the ruffian whose jaw had stopped the young reporter's uppercut. As he tenderly fingered his rapidly swelling jowl he glared at his prisoner in a manner that left no doubt in the latter's mind of his willingness to demonstrate his resentment in an unpleasantly active form at the first excuse.

Presently the door opened and Alma appeared, followed closely by Merrivale. Terry stared at the girl in wonder as she slowly came toward where he was seated in one of the chairs. Had he not been certain that she was the same person with whom he had been dancing an hour or so since, he could almost have persuaded himself that a stranger stood before him. The form and features, it is true, were those of the girl he loved; but some subtle change seemed to have taken place. She was the same —yet not the same. Her expression was different. There was a hardness about the now pale lips and a dull, defiant stare in usually tender eyes. Her movements seemed like those of an automaton actuated by another's will.

Professor Merrivale took his stand facing the girl, but behind Terry, and began to speak:

"This man says that you were aware of his intention to come here. Is that true?"

"It is not true."

The slowly uttered words fell like ice on Terry's heart.

"If he asserts that you let him into this house," pursued the professor, "then he is a liar?"

"He is a liar," came in the same toneless voice.

"He being an armed robber, I would be quite justified in meeting force with force?"

"Yes," answered the girl.

"Even though it were necessary to kill him?"

"Even though you killed him."

Terry strove desperately to reject the evidence of his own ears. Could this cold, inhuman, vengeful thing be the girl whose image had haunted him day and night for the past fortnight? Was she being impersonated by another woman? But his straining eyes soon dispelled that ray of hope. The body, at least, was that of Alma Wexford. But her soul—merciful powers! —what unbelievable change had taken place in that?

But there was worse to come. Merrivale slipped his hand behind him, and when he advanced it again it was holding an automatic pistol. Placing the black muzzle to Terry's right ear, the scientist again questioned Alma.

"Is it your desire that I should kill this spy?" he asked.

A sudden spasm of ferocity distorted the beautiful face as she almost hissed the answer:

"Yes. Kill him! Kill him! Let the vile traitor die!"

Merrivale threw back his head and laughed long but silently.

"You see, my friend, what mercy you may expect from her, and how much her evidence is likely to bear out any accusation you may level against me. But I do not seek your wretched life." He slipped the pistol back into his pocket, and motioned his myrmidons to sever Terry's bonds. "You saved me once—I give you life for life. I do not even ask for your assurance that you will not seek to harm me in the future; the soaring eagle can afford to despise the crawling worm. You are free. Go—and look to it that I have no cause to regret my clemency."

Five minutes later, Terry Hinton, his heart filled with a bitterness far

greater than that of the death he had so narrowly escaped, found himself stumbling homeward across Blackheath in the gray dawn of the coming day.

IT WAS a very haggard-looking Terry who ascended the staircase leading to the reporters' room of the *Daily Wire* some hours later. Even the bustling McBlair paused in his labors to comment on his unusual pallor.

"Had a hectic night, Terry?"

The young reporter nodded.

"Tolerably so," he sank his voice to a whisper, "considering that I spent part of it in the company of the future Autocrat of the World."

"The devil you did!" News editors are not easily startled, but McBlair was then. "Is there a story in it?"

"Yes, but you wouldn't dare to print it—yet. I'd like to have a couple of days off, if you're agreeable, Mac."

The canny Scot shot a shrewd look from beneath his sandy brows.

"Private investigations, eh?"

"Something of that sort," Terry returned carelessly.

McBlair knew his man well enough to sense the dogged purpose that lay beneath the seemingly indifferent words.

"You can take a week if you like." His freckled paw shot out and gripped that of Terry. "And I wish you good hunting, laddie, and a safe return."

It was but a few minutes' walk from the *Wire* office to New Scotland Yard, but Terry Hinton was well enough acquainted with the routine of that great establishment to know that there was no necessity for haste, for it would be a good half-hour before the First Commissioner arrived at his office. Sauntering down to the Embankment, he lit a cigarette and, leaning his elbows on the broad stone parapet, allowed his mind to fall into a revery as he gazed with unseeing eyes into the dun-colored waters of the Thames.

Not for a moment did he doubt that he had pierced the veil which hid the identity of the man who was threatening the world. Everything pointed to Professor Merrivale. His wealth, his scientific attainments, the callous, egoistic principles which he had so openly avowed—to say nothing of that second "proclamation" which Terry had surprized him in the act of typing—all alike seemed to confirm the fact. But, though convinced himself, Terry did not for an instant dream that his flimsy evidence would succeed in bringing the police authorities to his way of thinking. Most probably his theory would be laughed at; in which case he must rely on his own endeavors to bring this scientific crook to justice.

And Alma—what sudden revulsion of feeling could account for the change in her? One moment filled with a feeling which was at least one of warm friendliness toward him; the next, voicing a hatred, deep, implacable and deadly. What fiend had entered into her during those brief moments when the professor had been alone with her? Was it possible that Merrivale had added hypnotism to his very varied accomplishments?

A hoarse laugh at his elbow made him turn with a sudden start.

"Blimy, captin, still on the parapet? A bit different to the one we went over at Bois Grenair, eh? But yer don't 'ave ter keep yer blinkin' 'ead dahn for whizz-bangs 'ere, thank Gawd!"

Terry instantly recognized the man as a good-humored young scamp who at one time had been his batman in France, and as he noted the unshaven face and ragged clothes his hand began instinctively to search his pocket for some small change.

"It's Dawson, isn't it?" he said, with a not unkindly smile.

"Dawson it is, sir. 'Peg' Dawson they used to call me, becos I always

was 'on the peg' for something or other. I've struck a patch of bad luck lately, captin."

Terry already knew something about that bad luck. It concerned an unattended limousine which Peg had been keeping in running order for some weeks without informing its legal owner of the service he was rendering him. Terry made a mental calculation.

"You're just out, then?"

He did not specify "out of where," for in the lower stratum of society, no less than in the upper, there are certain things which the naming in plain language is not considered good taste.

"Yes, guv'nor, out—and down. In other words, down and out. I suppose you 'aven't——" Then he stopped and a slight redness appeared beneath his grime.

Terry liked him all the better for his hesitation in asking for the assistance which he evidently so badly needed. Dawson had not been such a bad sort, he reflected; if his distinction between *meum* and *tuum* had been a trifle hazy, he at least possessed the merit of unwavering fidelity toward those who employed him. In the picturesque metaphor of the Orient, Peg was "faithful to his salt," whatever his other failings might be.

Then a thought struck Terry which caused his eyes to light up. Here, cast up at his very feet by some chance eddy in the great ocean of life, was a piece of human flotsam which he could turn to good use. Shrewd, not over-scrupulous in keeping the strict letter of the law, possessing an *entrée* to the underworld that might result in an accumulation of unlimited information—here was the very assistant Terry needed in his self-appointed task of unmasking Merrivale.

"Are you game for a job?" he asked the man.

"Try me, captin!" There was no mistaking the eagerness in Peg's voice.

"Here's a retaining fee." Terry slipped a note into his unwashed hand. "Be here in an hour's time."

"It's a deal," said Peg. "But, beggin' yer pardon, captin, what's the nature of my future occupation?"

"You're going to be a crossbreed between Sherlock Holmes and Raffles," was the answer that made Peg stare. "But your chief job will be to keep your mouth shut as tightly as one of those——" He pointed to the Egyptian sphinx-headed lions of bronze which flank Cleopatra's Needle.

Peg gazed after the retreating figure of his new employer like a man trying to realize the impossible. He took out the note and crackled it to make sure he was not dreaming; then, without attempting to exchange it for the liquid refreshment which he felt the occasion called for, he replaced it in his pocket and sat down to await his benefactor's return.

"Peg, old boy, you've clicked," he confided to a flock of wheeling gulls overhead. "Shades of the company cook-sergeant! what a cushy job! I'm to be a 'Spinks'—a blinking sleuth-hound 'Spinks'!"

SIR WILFRED BRENDON, First Commissioner of Scotland Yard, was a handsome and extremely well-preserved man of about sixty years of age. A soldier of no mean ability, he had deserved well of his country by reason of the many victories—now forgotten, or nearly so—by which he had consolidated the British Empire in the East. That he was no less successful as a diplomat than he had been as a warrior was indicated by the tactful way in which he received the story Terry Hinton had to tell.

"Have you ever seen a mirage?" was his surprizing question when Terry had finished. "No? They're things you see in the desert, you know—distortion of the heated atmos-

phere, and all that kind of thing. Very interesting—very. You'd swear that there was something there—trees, a town, or what not. But when you tried to approach you'd find it was nothing — empty air — an illusion."

Terry reached for his hat.

"I see. But you don't find mirages on Blackheath, Sir Wilfred."

"Of course not. I was merely indulging in a little analogy. A mental mirage, now, is a thing that can be as deceptive as the real thing."

Terry shook his head.

"I won't contradict you, because I don't happen to have suffered from 'em myself. But I take it that the meaning of your bright little allegory is that you refuse to act?"

Sir Wilfred spread his hands with an expression of positive pain on his aristocratic features.

"Not at all, my dear sir. We will act with the utmost promptness if you will give us some tangible evidence to act on. What have you got against this very distinguished scientist whom you are so wildly accusing? Nothing —absolutely nothing. You must really be more careful before you level such charges against well-known people like him. Why, I myself had the pleasure of dining with the dear old professor only the other week. I found him delightful company—such a quick perception of humor. He absolutely roared with merriment when I explained to him my reasons for thinking the Chinese insurgents to be at the bottom of that threat to end the world."

"Yes, he would," said Terry shortly, and took his leave.

That same night Peg Dawson entered on his new duties.

". . . In conclusion," ran the report of the select committee of scientists, which had been convened with the object of assisting the government to arrive at a correct estimation of the threatened peril, "we beg to inform your Lordships that there is, in our opinion, no cause whatever for alarm. Even if it be true that this highly hypothetical gas has been discovered, the preparations which would be necessary to enable a volume sufficient to interfere with gravitation to be manufactured would have to be on such a scale, and the gas itself released simultaneously over such a wide area, that the activities of those engaged could hardly fail to escape notice. According to our findings, many hundreds of such generating bases would need to be in operation at a given time, and their activities would have to be spread over an area of many thousands of miles. Such a task, in our opinion, is utterly beyond the power of any body of men to accomplish secretly. . . ."

"It gives me great pleasure, gentlemen," said the chairman of the West Atlantic Shipping Company at the board meeting held at the Cannon Street Hotel, "in presenting the balance-sheet for the past half-year, to refer to a circumstance which has made, or at any rate has contributed to make, the substantial and gratifying increase in our dividends. The cost of bunker coal is, as you know, one of the heaviest items of expenditure that any shipping company has to face. In this respect, however, we have been able to effect a great economy. Hitherto the use of patent fuel blocks has not been looked upon with favor; but there has lately been placed on the market a line of patent fuel which possesses all the merits of the best Welsh steam coal at about one quarter of its cost. I refer, gentlemen, to the article which has been so widely advertised as 'Floxton's Fuel Blocks.' The report of our engineer in chief was most enthusiastic, and a trial run of one of our vessels proved the matter beyond dispute. Therefore we have entered into a contract with the company for a continuous supply to our numerous fleet of vessels, and by the beginning

of next month, I am pleased to say, they will be burning nothing else. Nor do we stand alone in this matter. The Cunard, White Star, and many other large companies have followed suit, which goes to prove that our step in adopting this patent fuel has been based on sound policy. Turning to the question of new ships . . ."

At first there seems but little connection between the two statements recorded above, yet they were nothing less than cause and effect. For the master-mind behind the company who sold its wares so cheaply was Professor Merrivale, and the innocent-looking black cubes of "Floxton's Fuel" contained the potential elements of the gas that was to wreck the world.

THE modern reporter must necessarily be something of a detective as well as a coiner of telling phrases. The gleaning of such items of news as Terry specialized in had not been a mere matter of recording the proceedings of police courts, or of compiling lists of guests at fashionable gatherings. Often in the past he had been called upon to assume an identity very different to his own, and the success with which he was able to sustain his assumed character, in appearance, voice and gesture, he owed in no small measure to his theatrical experience. It would have needed a very keen pair of eyes to have recognized the disreputable tramp lying asleep on Blackheath as the smart young reporter of the *Daily Wire*.

Eleven o'clock had just chimed from a neighboring church when a gray car swung out of the gates of Tudor Towers and disappeared down the hill leading to Greenwich. Instantly the tramp rose, yawned, stretched himself elaborately, and sauntered across the turf until he was hidden from sight by an angle of the wall which encloses Greenwich Park. Here stood a long, swift-looking car which had apparently developed engine trouble, for the liveried chauffeur had been tinkering with it for the past hour.

"The usual, Peg," said the tramp, stepping into the rear of the car, which instantly leapt into motion and sped downhill in the wake of the one which had emerged from the Towers.

Before the main road had been reached, a remarkable change for the better had taken place in the tramp's appearance. Stripping off his outer rags and peeling the beard from his face, he now appeared in a neat gray suit more in keeping with the vehicle in which he sat. Presently an observer, had there been one, would have noticed that he was drawing his fingers meditatively across his upper lip, and then apparently coughing violently, holding his handkerchief before his face as he did so. When, a moment later, he raised his face it was adorned with a neat black mustache.

Meanwhile Peg Dawson had rapidly caught up with the car ahead, though he knew his business far too well to get close enough to attract the attention of whoever might be in it. Terry, as he noted the adroit manner in which the ex-crook shadowed his quarry, was more than ever thankful for the chance which had thrown him across his path.

Reaching the crossroads at Greenwich Church, the car turned eastward past the huge stone building on the river bank, and a few minutes later was speeding down the broad inclined avenue which slopes to the entrance of Blackwall Tunnel. Fortunately there was plenty of traffic through this artery which connects the north and south banks of the Thames, and Peg was able to keep the gray car well in sight. But it was far otherwise when Canning Town was reached. Still bearing eastward, the car plunged into a perfect labyrinth of the mean streets which abut on the Victoria Docks at Tidal Basin

and Custom House. Peg had stuck to his quarry manfully, yet there were so many occasions when the car had been out of sight in the narrow turnings, that both he and Terry well knew that their efforts had been vain. On a dozen or more occasions there would have been both time and opportunity for a man to alight from the car and slip down one of the narrow alleys which intersect the neighborhood.

It was with the feeling of pursuing a forlorn hope that they fell into the wake of the gray car when it at last emerged into the Victoria Dock Road again, making apparently for Woolwich.

"Artful devil!" grinned Peg in a tone of involuntary admiration. "See his lay, sir? There's no tunnel for cars at Woolwich—we'll have to cross by the steam ferry unless we want to lose his trail, and he can hardly help spotting us on the boat."

"Seems you're right, Peg," agreed Terry. "But carry on. One way home is as good as another now."

Once more they crossed the Thames, this time on the surface; then pursued and pursuer headed westward.

"He's fooled us all he wants, sir," said Peg. "And now he's making for home."

When they had passed through Charlton village Terry was forced to admit himself beaten. He was just on the point of ordering Peg to give up the chase, when something happened that seemed to indicate that there was still a surprize in store for him. Just past the village is a small patch of green, with the road running round it on each side. The car, on reaching this, did not keep straight on, but, making a complete circuit of the grassy plot, tore back along the road, heading straight for Terry's car.

"Look out, sir! The blighter's going to ram us!" yelled Peg, jamming on his brakes and lugging a spanner from his overcoat pocket.

But the gray car avoided them with a turn of the steering-wheel and came to a halt a few yards off.

Glancing at the driver, Terry recognized the broad-chested ruffian whom he had floored during the struggle at the Towers. His fleshy features were creased in a grin as he held out a sealed envelope.

"With the master's compliments," he said.

Keeping a wary eye on the fellow's movements, Terry advanced and took the missive.

"I don't think as how there's any answer," said the man with another grin. He let in the clutch as he spoke, and the gray car rapidly made off.

Glancing at the superscription, Terry saw that it was addressed to "Mr. Terence Hinton, Amateur Detective." Inside was a sheet of paper bearing the typewritten message:

Hope you liked your joy-ride.

Terry smiled bitterly as he read the mocking words.

"Fooled again!" he muttered, and grasped the paper to tear it into pieces.

"Hold hard, sir!" cried Peg, as he stood opposite. "There's something written on the back.

Turning it over, Terry's heart gave a sudden bound as his eyes fell on some words hastily scrawled in pencil:

S. O. S. Floxton's Factory, Bow.

It was the well-remembered handwriting of Alma Wexford.

AT 10 O'CLOCK on the night of September 30th, there was a distinguished company gathered in the large, domed room which houses the great eighteen-inch reflecting telescope which is the pride of the Royal Observatory, Greenwich. The Houses of Parliament had adjourned specially for the purpose of enabling those members of the government, who desired to do so, to witness the fulfil-

ment, or the confutation, of the threat which had been uttered by the self-styled Autocrat of the World.

There had been some half-hearted attempts at jocularity when they had first met; but gradually a more sober tone had crept into their conversation. Apart from the gravity of the matter which had brought them together, there was a depressing atmosphere about the dimly lighted echoing room, with its weird shadows and strange-looking instruments.

"I understand that the change—provided, of course, any takes place—will be very gradual?" said the prime minister as he thoughtfully filled his pipe. "How then are we to know if we are—er—off the track?"

The astronomer royal cleared his throat. He was a thin, middle-aged man with sandy-gray hair worn rather long, and he seemed a little embarrassed by the eminent company gathered round.

"A detailed description of our method of determining any change in the earth's orbit might be difficult for the lay mind to grasp," he said with a nervous cough. "I think, however, I may be able to enlighten you by means of a homely simile. You will please imagine a row of any objects—let us say telegraph poles—arranged in a perfectly straight line for, say, a quarter of a mile. Standing at one end of the row, you would, of course, only see one post, for the others, if properly alined, would be hidden behind it. The rest would be eclipsed—or as we call it 'occulted'—by the first. Of course, the same thing would apply if there were only two poles, one at each end of the line; but, the more points, the more accurate and simple the observation becomes. I think I have made my meaning clear so far, gentlemen?"

"Quite—quite," came the murmured chorus from the shadows.

"Very well then. Now imagine yourself stepping three paces to the right (or, if you like, to the left). What would you see then? You would find that the whole row of posts was visible, because of the fact that you had—although to a very small extent considering the length of the row of posts—changed your position.

"It is a similar observation that we are about to make now. In our case the man at the end of the posts represents the earth; the nearest post is the planet Mars, which revolves around the sun in a known and calculable orbit as does our own planet; the furthermost post is a certain fixed star. By celestial mathematics, and careful plotting of the orbit of Mars, we know that at exactly thirteen minutes past 11 o'clock tonight the fixed star should be occulted, or hidden, by Mars. If that be so, then we shall know that the earth is occupying its usual position in space. But if, on the contrary, that fixed star is visible at thirteen minutes past 11, instead of being hidden behind Mars, then we shall know that one of the orbits has changed; and by making other astronomical checks we shall know whether it is our own orbit or the orbit of Mars that has been altered."

In the silence that followed, a silence so intense that the slow ticking of the observatory clock could be distinctly heard, he seated himself in the padded chair beneath the eyepiece of the telescope and began to fumble among the maze of winces and levers which controlled the giant tube.

"And now . . . we shall see," murmured the prime minister. The flame of the match flickered as he lit his pipe.

"PASS along, there. Pass along, *please!* There's nothing to see. Pass along."

It takes more than a cosmic catastrophe to upset the equanimity of the London policeman, and the squad which had been detailed to control the ever-growing crowd which had assembled in Trafalgar Square repeated

their slogan with good-humored persistence.

"Move on, please. What are you all waiting for?"

"Garn!" shrilled a voice from the crowd. "We're waitin' fer the hend of the world to come, o' course."

"You go home and get your old man's supper, or it'll come quicker than you think for, missus!" returned the policeman with a laugh. "Pass along. Pass along."

When 11 o'clock chimed from the tower of Big Ben the authorities gave up all hope of keeping a path through the crowd, and the traffic was diverted. The low hum which rose from the crowd was punctuated by the hoarse cries of the newsboys selling a special edition of the *Wire* on the outskirts of the square, and the strains of the band of the revivalist meeting which was being held somewhere down Northumberland Avenue. Every now and again the voice of a preacher could be heard from the direction of the steps of St. Martin's Church, calling upon his hearers to prepare themselves for the judgment to come.

As the three-quarters boomed out on the night, it was greeted with a faint, ironical cheer.

"Another quarter of an hour to live," cried some wit from the press. "Anyone like to oblige me with a fag, to 'ave me final smoke?"

As the minutes dragged on, the laughter and jests gradually ceased. Scoffing and incredulous as they were for the most part, the vague apprehension of what untold possibilities might lie in the next few seconds was sufficient to sober the most reckless. A sudden hush fell upon the crowded Square as the first chimes of midnight began to sound.

"Extra! End-of-the-world edition!" chanted the distant newsboys.

"Eternity! Eternity!" came from the steps of the church.

Slowly the last vibrations of the twelfth stroke died away. . . .

Nothing happened, and the great gasp of relief that issued simultaneously from thousands of throats alone showed how great the tension had been.

"All clear, boys," cried a voice, imitating the tones of the familiar air-raid bugle. And, as though it had been a pre-arranged signal, a mighty cheer rose which reached the myriad watchers round St. Paul's Cathedral, who sent it back again and again, until the whole city seemed as though it were thundering forth a triumphant pæan of joy.

Then the crowds dispersed, laughing as though they had been enjoying a jest that was all the more piquant by its being spiced with threatened tragedy.

But there was no laughter in the eyes of the group of men gathered in the darkened room of the observatory. The ticking of the clock sounded louder than ever as they watched the astronomer royal rise from his chair and calmly snap on the cap of the eyepiece of the great telescope.

"Well?"

It was the prime minister who asked the question, though the voice was very unlike those ringing tones that had so often held the House spellbound.

The astronomer shrugged slightly.

"The threat was not an idle one, gentlemen," he said. "Our earth has been deflected from its course."

Someone clutched him by the arm. It was young Lord Heronwood, who had just succeeded to his title. His face was ashy, for he was a man for whom a great and illustrious future had been predicted.

"Rot!" he cried roughly. "You are mistaken—you must be!"

The astronomer shook his head.

"Men may lie, but the stars can not. Where Mars should have appeared alone, there is now showing beside it the fixed star which should have been hidden behind the planet.

That means that we are every second rushing farther into space. Of course there is the faint chance that it may be Mars instead of our earth which is deflected; but in view of the threats made by the self-styled Autocrat of the World, there can be little doubt that it is our own planet, and not Mars, that is leaving the solar system."

Heronwood's grip grew even tighter.

"My God! That means——"

"Humanity is doomed!"

The fate of the World-Wrecker and the result of his plot will be told next month in the concluding chapters of this story

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The Witch Girl

By A. LESLIE

They say a leprechaun walked in,
The day that I was born,
And touched me on the forehead
With a green and pointed thorn;
They say three bats flew through the door
And fluttered out again—
An owl thrice hooted to the sun,
A wolf howled in the fen.

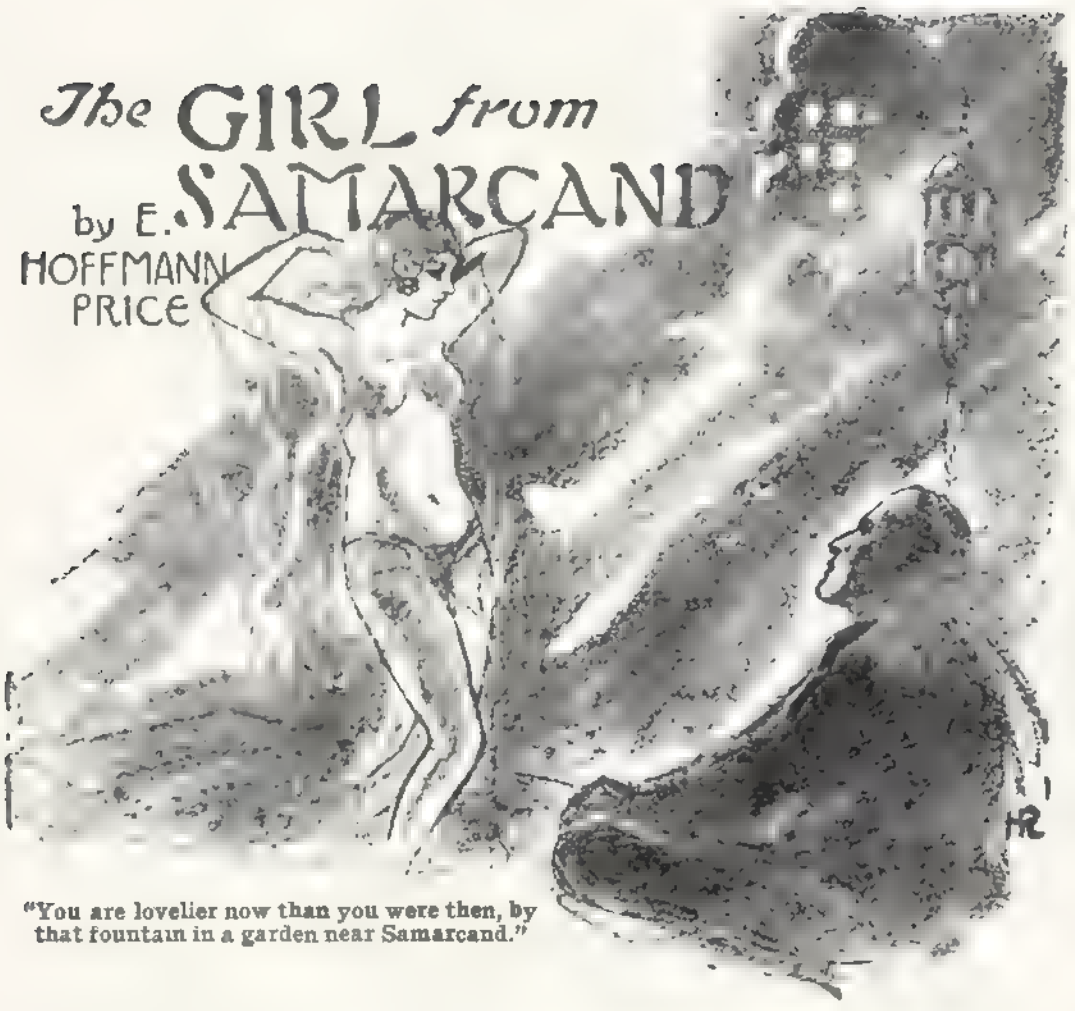
I do not know these things are true,
But I know that I have seen
White shapes flit through the moonmist
With little men in green;
I've heard the ghostly Harpers
Make music in the night;
The fretted fires of Mora
Have bathed me in their light.

I know my face is strangely white,
My lips are strangely red;
I know my hair coils coldly black
Like snakes upon my head;
I know my childhood playmates
Were the adder and the frog;
I may not tell of things I've seen
Within the lonely bog.

Oh, once I had a lover
Whose hair was like the sun;
Yes, once I had a lover,
But only—only—one!
He kissed me when the stars were white;
He harkened to my croon:
And then my arms were empty,
And—*a bat flew to the moon!*

The GIRL from SAMARCAND

by E. HOFFMANN PRICE



"You are lovelier now than you were then, by that fountain in a garden near Samarcand."

AS HER guest set the dainty bone china cup on the onyx-topped, teak tabouret and sank back among the embroidered cushions, Diane knew to the syllable the words which were to filter forth with the next breath of smoke; for three years as Hammersmith Clarke's wife had convinced her that that remark was inevitable.

"My dear, where did you ever get those perfectly gorgeous rugs?"

And Diane, true to form, smiled ever so faintly, and luxuriated in the suspicion of a yawn: the ennui of an odalisk hardened to the magnificence of a seraglio carpeted with an ancient Feraghan rug, and hung with silken witcheries from the looms of Kashan. Diane saw the wonder permeate her friend's soul and heard it surge into words.

"The rugs? Why—well, I married them along with Ham, you might say. Yes, they are rather pretty, aren't they? But they're an awful pest at times——"

"Naturally," agreed Louise, who lived in a loft in the Pontalba Building, where she could look down into the Plaza where Jackson reins in his brazen horse and lifts his brazen hat in salutation to the French Quarter of New Orleans. "You simply couldn't let the maid clean——"

"Maid? Lord help us, but I daren't

touch them myself! I tried it, once. That heaven-sent prayer-rug''—Diane indicated an ancient Ghiordes, a sea-green splendor worth more than his right eye to any collector—''looked a bit dingy. And Ham caught me at it. What was left of my hair just fell short of a close shingle. Do you know, one day I caught him filling the bath-tub with milk——''

''What?''

''Precisely. Seems some expert claimed a milk bath improves the luster. So the little Bokhara—that blood-red creature beneath your feet—got a treatment fit for a Circassian beauty. I'm just waiting for him to bring home a duster of bird-of-paradise plumes for this venerable wreck.''

Diane stroked what was left of the peachblow, sapphire and gold nap of an age-old Senna woven on a silken warp.

''The truth of it is,'' continued Diane, ''I feel guilty of bigamy. The man was married to his rugs long before he ever met me. 'Member how we speculated on the pros and cons of polygamy the other day at Arnaud's? Well, here I am, one lone woman competing with a dozen odd favorites, and a new rival added to the harem every so often.''

''Good lord, Diane, what next! You are unique. Why, one would think you were jealous of them.''

''Well, I am!''

''Outlandish as that fantastic husband of yours. I don't know which is the more *outré,* his mania for these beautiful things with the impossible names, or your—heavens above, it does really seem like resentment against them. Now, if you'd married Peter''—Louise laughed metallically—''he'd never have given you time to be jealous of a *rug.*''

''That's just it,'' flared Diane. ''I could forgive flirtations and black eyes, and a reasonable degree of non-support. But these damned rugs—look at that!''

Diane dug her cobraskin toe into the closely worn nap of the Feraghan carpet.

''Look at it! Just a rug, the first time. But live with it day after day. See the witchery sparkling in it at sunset. Catch yourself losing yourself in the thrill of its three hundred years, wondering that all the ecstasy ever lost in the entire world could be imprisoned in a rug. Then see your one and only and otherwise adequate husband sitting of an evening, hours at a stretch, staring at it and dreaming of all the richness and glamor he's lost through becoming civilized, learning to wear shoes, and having only one woman, and she his wife, about the house. Yes, I called you up to have you listen to me get the indignation out of my soul. The truth of it is, Lou, that if I don't get out of this atmosphere soon, I'll go utterly mad. Some day I'm going to move in on you in your attic—anything to get away from all this!''

''Do you mean to say,'' began Louise with wide-spaced deliberation, ''that you'd actually leave Ham because he likes to mess and poke around with his rugs, and spend most of his waking moments talking about them? Honestly, now——''

''Good Lord, I could stand his *talking* about them. But''—Diane shuddered—''Lou, he *loves* them. Sits there, transfigured, like a saint contemplating the dewdrop glistening in the lotus cup.''

''When I suggested, over at the Iron Gate, that you move in with me, I didn't know that you were married—they all called you *la belle Livaudaise,* and you were the life of everything—and least of all, I never suspected anyone had you enshrined in magnificence like this. Better think it over, Di—I've been through the mill, and I *know.*''

DIANE from the first had been fascinated by the exotic atmosphere in which Clarke had planted her after their marriage; but in the end, seeing

how they had become a part of him, she half consciously hated them and their everlasting song of Bokhara and Herat of the Hundred Gardens: an unheard song to which Clarke listened, and replied in unspoken syllables. And thus it was that Diane learned that to live in Clarke's apartment would be to become an accessory to those precious fabrics that were his hard-ridden hobby; for no woman would fit into the dim, smoky shadows of that titled salon unless bejeweled and diaphanously veiled she could dance with curious paces and gestures beneath the sullen glow of the great brazen mosque lamp as became the favorite of a khan in far-off Tartary. From the very beginning, Diane fought to keep her individuality untainted by the overwhelming personality of those damnably lovely fabrics from Shiraz and the dusty plains of Feraghan.

And Diane was right; for they dreamed, those old weavers, of the roses of Kirman, of the evening star that danced on the crest of Mount Zagros, of dancing girls in the gardens of Naishapur, of fountains that sprayed mistily in the moonlit valley of Zarab-shan; and all this they wove into what we now learn to catalogue as Sixteenth Century Persian, or whatever our best guess may be. Into his masterwork the weaver wove his soul; so that whoever lives with one of those imperishable sorceries that come out of the East must in the end feel its presence unless he be somewhat duller than the very wood of the loom on which it was woven.

Look upon wine as often as you wish, but beware of a Bokhara when it is red—red as the blood of slaughter—red as the embers of a plundered city—a redness charged with the quartered octagons of Turkestan—for in the end you will become enslaved to the silky splendor that once graced the tent floor of a Tekke prince. . . .

Diane was right; though Diane never suspected, even dimly, what in the end really did happen to Hammersmith Clarke. For, naturally enough, neither she nor anyone else saw or heard the Yellow Girl; that is, no one but Clarke: and he saw and heard too much.

Had she suspected—but she couldn't have. For who would imagine Fate riding to the crossroads in a truck of the American Express Company? It just isn't done; not until one looks back and sees that it could have happened in no other way.

But unheard-of things happen in Turkestan; and while one may pause for an evening's glamor beside some moon-kissed fountain in the valley of Zarab-shan, and then march on, forgetting, there is that which does not forget, being undying and everlasting; so that though forgotten, it reaches forth across time and space, not only clinging to the pile of a rug from Samarcand, but resorting even to express trucks to carry it the last step toward capturing the forgetful one. . . .

All this Diane knew without knowing why she knew: and it seemed so reasonable that there was nothing incongruous in shuddering and saying as she often had, "I'm afraid of the damned things. . . ."

As the door clicked behind the departing expressman, Clarke clipped the leaden seals of the cylindrical bale, cut its stitching, and thrilled at the thought of the rug he was about to unwrap; for the bale was from Siraganian of New York, who by dint of persistent reaching into the East must finally have succeeded in executing Clarke's impossible order.

A tawny, golden silkiness smiled from the gaping burlap sheath.

Just a glimpse of that wonder in buff and cream, with its lotus-bud border, and frets and meanders in blue and coral and peach, told Clarke that this of all things was as far as possible from what he had ordered

Siraganian to get, cost what it might. For in place of Persian intricacies in deep wine reds and solemn green, florid magnificence that Ispahan had given to the world before the splendor died, Clarke was confronted by an ancient rug from Samarcand—silken Samarcand in the valley of Zarabshan — thick-napped and luxurious, mysterious with its Mongolian cloud bands and asymmetrical corner pieces, bats and dragons, and five-medallioned firmaments of blue that could come from none but the vats of Turkestan.

"Good God! It's silk!" marveled Clarke as he stroked the lustrous pile. "Silk, and by the Rod, on a linen warp!"

He wondered how Siraganian could have made that incredible mistake, sending him such a rug in place of what he had ordered. If it were a case of sending something just as good—an unheard-of procedure with that Armenian merchant-prince—he certainly had been crafty enough, for no connoisseur who once touched that rich pile, whose eyes were once dazzled by those insinuant colors, whose senses were stricken by the sorcery of cabalistical designs, could ever return it and say that he had ordered something else. Rather would he thank Siraganian for his error.

A silk pile on a warp of blue linen, and woven in the days when Persian Hafiz was called to account by that fierce Mongol for a verse wherein the poet bartered the prince's favorite cities, Samarcand and Bokhara, for the smile of a *Turki* dancing girl, and the mole on her left breast: unbelievable fortune had sent him this incredible rug.

And then Clarke's wondering, triumphant eyes clouded as he thought of a girl beside whom Samarcand and Bokhara were but the tinkle of brazen anklets—a very long time ago, when there was no Diane, when Clarke pursued rugs for that same Siraganian who now sought them for Clarke.

"*Egher an Turki bedest ared dili mara,*" muttered Clarke, forgetting all but the glamorous perils that had lured him far into lost cities and high adventure. Hafiz was right.

And for a moment the rug from Samarcand, its five by seven feet of tawny, silken perfection putting to confusion the priceless Feraghan on which it had been unrolled, gleamed unregarded as Clarke's mind whirled to the sonorous accent with which the divine Hafiz had enslaved the East and its savage conquerors.

"*Egher an Turki*——"

Strange, how after all this time one would remember. It must be that one could never quite forget.

The telephone rang; but Clarke ignored it until the jangling became too insistent, when he muffled the bell with several towels and a small cushion.

"Too bad," he apologized, as he took the cord from his lounge robe and completed the throttling of the almost stifled annoyance, "but I simply can't be disturbed."

In which he was wrong: for to contemplate that wonder from Samarcand was more disturbing than any voice that could creep in over the wire. He fingered the rings of dull, hand-hammered gold that were sewed to one of the selvaged sides; he wondered what palace wall had been enriched by that precious fabric—and with it all came the knowledge that that very rug had been a part of his own past. The life that had been knotted into its pile and the sorcery that had been woven into its pattern were speaking to one of Clarke's forgotten selves. Yet he was certain that he had never before seen it; for one could never have forgotten such as this, though seen but for an instant. Truly, the *rug* was a stranger, but the presence that accompanied it was demanding recognition.

In the meanwhile, Diane tired of hearing the operator's "They don't

answer,'' and abandoned her efforts to remind Clarke of an engagement.

''I wonder,'' she mused, as she finally set aside the useless telephone, ''what deviltry my *bien aimé* is devising.''

And then she sought the rendezvous unattended, and made the customary apologies for Clarke's unaccountable absence.

He might have retreated into that dusky inner kingdom which from the very beginning he had held against Diane — a silence into which he plunged unaccompanied, not lacking appreciative company, but rather loving solitude and electing seclusion rather than the sharing of the fancies that twisted and the thoughts that writhed in his strange brain.

As Diane made her well-rehearsed apologies and frothed behind her vivacious mask, Clarke noted the manila envelope that was fastened to the web of the rug from Samarcand, and addressed to him: a letter, doubtless from Siraganian.

''We regret,'' wrote the Armenian, ''that thus far we have had no success in finding at any cost a rug of the weave you ordered. However, we take pleasure in forwarding you this rug which a caravan stopping at Meshed left with our agent in that city with instructions to forward it to our New York office and thence to you. We are pleased that your agent saw fit to use our facilities for forwarding it to you, and wish to congratulate you on having obtained such a priceless specimen. Should you at any time care to dispose of it, be so kind as to give us an option on it, for we are in a position to offer you a better price than any dealer or collector in the United States. . . . ''

The rug itself was improbable enough—but Siraganian's letter! An insoluble riddle. It couldn't be a jest. Then who——?

True enough, Colonel Merbere's expedition must have passed through Samarcand, Yarkand, and Kashgar on its way into the unknown stretches of Chinese Turkestan; but his acquaintance with the colonel was slight, and he had no friend in the colonel's train. And what obscure acquaintance of the ''wish you were here'' postal-card banality would send a rug which in the old days served as a gift from one prince to another?

Diane's arrival cut the thread of fancy.

''Oh, Ham, but it *is* gorgeous,'' enthused *la belle Livaudaise* as she entered the roseate duskiness of Clarke's studio. And to herself, ''Another rival. . . . ''

Then she rehearsed the excuses she had offered for Ham's absence, and hoped he'd absent-mindedly contradict her the first time he deigned to speak for himself. That done, one must consider the latest addition to the seraglio.

Clarke detailed the story of the rug and its riddle.

''But who in the world would send you such a gift,'' wondered Diane.

''Exactly no one, *très chère.*''

''Unless,'' Diane pointed out, ''it might be one of your lost loves in those Asiatic playgrounds you've never entirely left.''

Clarke laughed, but his derision was unconvincing, and Diane knew that he had been deep in the blacknesses of Asian nights; knew that her arrival had been an intrusion, that he was but a friendly stranger, babbling to her, a friendly stranger, of loveliness whose intoxication forced him to speak of it to anyone, even her.

The others were bad enough, with their everlasting song of Bokhara, and Herat of the Hundred Gardens—an unheard song to which Clarke listened, and replied in unspoken syllables; they were bad enough, they, and those monstrous fancies which at times he smilingly expressed with deliberate vagueness, but this yellow witch from Samarcand——

DIANE knew that more than a rug had emerged from that bale whose burlap winding-sheet still littered the floor.

At last it seemed that she was intruding on a *tête-à-tête*, eavesdropping on a monologue; so that when Clarke would emerge from his reveries, Diane resented the inevitable thought that he was robbing himself to keep her company. But patience reaches its limit, finally. . . .

She saw it, one night, twinkle and smile through a lustrous haze that played over its surface, smile the slow, curved smile of a carmine-lipped woman through the veils of her mystery; saw Clarke sitting there, eyes shearing the veil and half smiling in return, a devotee in the ecstatic contemplation of a goddess shrouded in altar fumes. . . .

"Ham!"

"Yes," answered Clarke's lips. He had now perfected the trick of having his body act as his proxy.

"Are you taking me to that show tonight?"

"What show?" Clarke the simulacrum stirred lazily in the depths of the cushion-heaped lounge. "The truth of it is, my dear," he resumed after a pause during which some memory of the proposed entertainment must have returned, "truth of it is I'm awfully busy tonight——"

"Busy sitting there staring at nothing and sipping Pernod!" flared Diane, the wrath of months flashing forth. Then, as she saw Clarke settle back into the depths: "Listen, once for all: this nonsense has lasted too long. I might as well have married a mummy! Either get that thing out of the house, or I'll leave you to your pious meditations indefinitely——"

"What? Good Lord, Diane, what's this?"

"You heard me. You used to be half human, but now you're utterly impossible. And if you can't show me a little attention, I'm leaving here and now. For the past many weeks you've acted like a model for a petrified forest. Ever since that yellow beast——"

"Yellow beast?"

"Exactly! That damned rug is driving me crazy——"

"Is, or has driven?" suggested Clarke.

"Lies there like a beast of prey just ready to wake. And you sit there, night after night, staring at it until you fall asleep in your chair. Does it go, or do I?"

"What do you want me to do? Throw it away?"

"I don't care what you do with it. Only I won't stay in the house with it. It gives me the creeps. You've said entirely too much in your sleep lately—first yellow rugs, and now it's a yellow girl. I'm through!"

Clarke's brows rose in Saracenic arches. And then he smiled with surprizing friendliness and a touch of wonder.

"Di, why didn't you tell me sooner? I could understand your craving alligator pears at 3 in the morning—I might have understood that, but hating a rug is really a new one on me——"

"No, stupid, it's nothing like that! I just hate the damned thing, and no more to be said."

"Well, lacking the infallible alibi" —Clarke glared and assumed his fighting face—"if you mean I choose between you and the rug, I'll call a taxi right now."

"Don't bother. I'll walk."

The door slammed.

Clarke twisted his mustache, and achieved a laugh; not merry, but still a laugh. And then he sank back among the cushions.

"Yellow Girl, I thought *you* were fantastic. . . ."

LE VIEUX CARRE wondered when the next morning it was rumored that *la belle Livaudaise* had been seen hurrying down Saint Peter Street without speaking to any one of the

several acquaintances she had met; but when at the Green Shutter and the Old Quarter Bookstore it was announced that Diane was living in a loft of the Pontalba Building, wonder ceased. For Diane's friend Louise had been no less garrulous than she should have been, so that the habitués of the French Quarter were prepared for the news.

And then it was said that to gain admittance to Clarke's studio one must know the code of taps whereby someone who at times left a certain side door bearing bottles of Pernod announced his arrival; for Clarke answered neither doorbell nor telephone. The vendor of Pernod was certainly a discreet person; yet even a discreet seller of absinthe could see no harm in mentioning that his patron found enormous fascination in watching the play of sunlight and the dance of moonbeams on the golden buff pile of a rug that was more a sleeping, breathing creature than any sane child of the loom.

Finally the courier failed to gain admittance, despite his tapping in code. And this he thought worthy of Diane's ear.

"He starves himself, *petite*—since three days now he has not admitted me. All the while she lies there, gleaming in the moon, that awful rug —*mordieu*, it is terrible. . . . "

Diane had stedfastly denied that which had been clamoring for recognition. But when this last bit was added to what had gone before, logic gave way, and Diane's fears asserted themselves. That rug *was* haunted, *was* bewitched, *was* bedevilling Clarke; logic or no logic, the fact was plain.

Driven by that monstrous thought, Diane exhumed the little golden keyring and started up Royal Street, determined to cross the barrier before it became impassable. But her determination wavered; and before fitting the well worn key into the lock, she applied her ear to the keyhole, listened, and heard Clarke's voice.

Diane resisted the temptation to use her key and stage a scene that even in the imperturbable Vieux Carré would be sensational for at least a week. Then her pride conquered, and she achieved a most credible smile of disdain.

"Sly devil, pretending it was a rug he was so absorbed in. . . ."

And, since it was but an amorous escapade, Diane's unbelievable speculations were replaced by thoughts reasonable enough not to be terrifying.

THAT very night, Clarke was sitting cross-legged on the floor of his studio, full under the red glow of a tall bronze mosque lamp. Before him, shimmering in the moonlight that streamed in through the French windows, lay the rug from Samarcand, mysterious and golden, with its pale sapphire corner pieces glittering like a distant sea viewed through a cleft between two mountain crests.

All the witchery and ecstasy that had ever been lost in the entire world were reassembled, pulsing in the silken pile which he contemplated. And this was *the* night; the Night of Power, when Fate stalked through the corridors of the world like a colossus just risen from an age-old throne of granite, resistless and unconquerable. Clarke had spent so many nights and days of staring that it was inevitable that there must be such a night. He saw more than the wonder before him: in place of the marvel woven by deft, forgotten hands, there gleamed enchantingly as through moon-touched mist a garden in the valley of Zarab-shan.

Then came a faint, oddly accented drumming and piping, music to whose tune dead years reassembled their bones and danced forth from their graves. And their ghosts as they danced exhaled an overwhelming sweetness that made Clarke's brain reel and glow, and his blood surge madly in

anticipation of that which he knew must follow.

Then out of the blackness just beyond the range of the ruddy mosque lamp and full into the moonlight that marched slowly across the rug came a slim Yellow Girl, diaphanously garbed and veiled. Her anklets clicked faintly; and very faint was the tinkle of the pendant that adorned her unusual coiffure.

"All these many days I have sought you, my lord," she began, as she extended her arms in welcome. "But in vain, until tonight, when at last I parted the veil and crossed the Border."

Clarke nodded understandingly, and looked full into her dark, faintly slanted eyes.

"And I have been thinking of you," he began, "ever since someone sent me this rug on which you stand. It is strange how this rug could bridge the gap of twenty years and bring into my very house a glimpse of the valley of Zarab-shan. And stranger yet that you could escape from your father's house and find me here. Though strangest of all, time has not touched you, when by all reason you should be old, and leathery, and past forty. . . . Yet you are lovelier now than you were then, by that fountain in a garden near Samarcand."

"It is not strange," contradicted the Yellow Girl, as she pirouetted with dainty feet across the moon-lapped silk. "For you see me now as I was when I wove my soul into this very rug."

Clarke smiled incredulously: which was illogical enough, since, compared with the girl's presence, nothing else should be incredible.

"How can that be, Yellow Girl, seeing that we two met one evening twenty years ago, whereas this rug was woven when the Great Khan sat enthroned in Samarcand and reproved the Persian Hafiz for his careless disposal of the Great Khan's favorite cities. This was the joy of kings hundreds of years before you and I were born——"

"Before the *last* time we were born," corrected the Yellow Girl. "But the first time—at least, the first time that I can recollect—the barred windows of a prince's palace failed to keep you from me. And eunuchs with crescent-bladed simitars likewise failed. But in the end—why must all loveliness have an end?—a bowstring for me, and a swordstroke for you. . . ."

The Yellow Girl shuddered as she stroked her smooth throat with fingers that sought to wipe off the last lingering memory of a cord of hard-spun silk.

"And from the first," continued the girl, "I knew what our doom would be. So I started weaving, and completed my task before they suspected us and the bowstring did its work. My soul, my self, being woven cunningly and curiously into silk rich enough to hang on the wall of the khan's palace, waited patiently and wondered whether you and I could have our day again. Thus it was in the beginning——"

"Ah . . . now it does come back to me," interrupted Clarke, "as in a dream dimly remembered. How compactly and stiflingly they would wrap me in a bale of silk and carry me past the guards and into your presence. And by what devious routes I would leave you . . . yes, and how painlessly swift is the stroke of a simitar. . . ."

The Yellow Girl shuddered.

"A simitar truly wielded is really nothing, after all," continued Clarke. "I might have been sawn asunder between planks. . . . Well, and that meeting in the garden these short twenty years ago was after all not our first . . . it seems that I knew then that it was not the first. Though but for an evening——"

"Yes. Just for an evening. So to what end were we spared bowstrings and the stroke of swift simitars, since

we had but an evening?'' And thinking of the empty years of luxurious imprisonment that followed, she smiled somberly. ''For only an evening. And then you forgot, until this rug—this same rug I wove centuries ago—interrupted your pleasant adventuring, and reminded you.

''Death stared me in the face. The end of life more vainly lived than the first. I knew that I was leaving this avatar after having lived but one stolen evening. So I sent a trusted servant to carry this very rug to Meshed. For when we met in the garden, you were hunting rugs for him who now seeks them for your delight. And I knew that he would find you if you still lived. Thus it is that I have crossed the Border, and stand before you as I did once before—this time on that very rug which I wove centuries ago, while living in hope of another meeting and in dread of the bowstring I knew would in the end find me.''

The moon patch had marched toward the end of the rug from Samarcand, and was cutting into the blue web at its end. Clarke knew that when there remained no more room for her tiny feet, she would vanish, not ever to reappear. But Clarke hoped against knowledge.

''Yellow Girl,'' he entreated, ''my door will be barred to friend and acquaintance alike, if you will but return on whatever nights the moon creeps across our rug. . . . ''

Had Diane, listening at the door, understood, she would have used her key. But Diane merely heard:

''And I shall wait for these nights as long as life remains in me. For all that has happened since then is nothing and less than nothing; and all has been a dream since that one night in a garden of Zarab-shan.''

Very little remained of the moon patch. The Yellow Girl stepped a tiny pace forward, to prolong her stay yet another few moments. All but the moonlit strip of the rug from Samarcand glowed bloodily in the flare of the brazen mosque lamp.

''No, forgetful lover,'' chided the Yellow Girl, ''I can not return. I can not cross the Border again. In Samarcand, eight hundred years ago we mocked for a while the doom that hung over us, and in the end called the bowstring but a caress of farewell. Again, in the garden of Zarab-shan we met, we parted, and you forgot: so this time I take no chances. While I can not return, you at least can follow me . . . if you will . . . for it is very easy. . . . ''

She edged along the ever narrowing strip of moon-bathed silk, and with an embracing gesture, lured Clarke to rise and follow her.

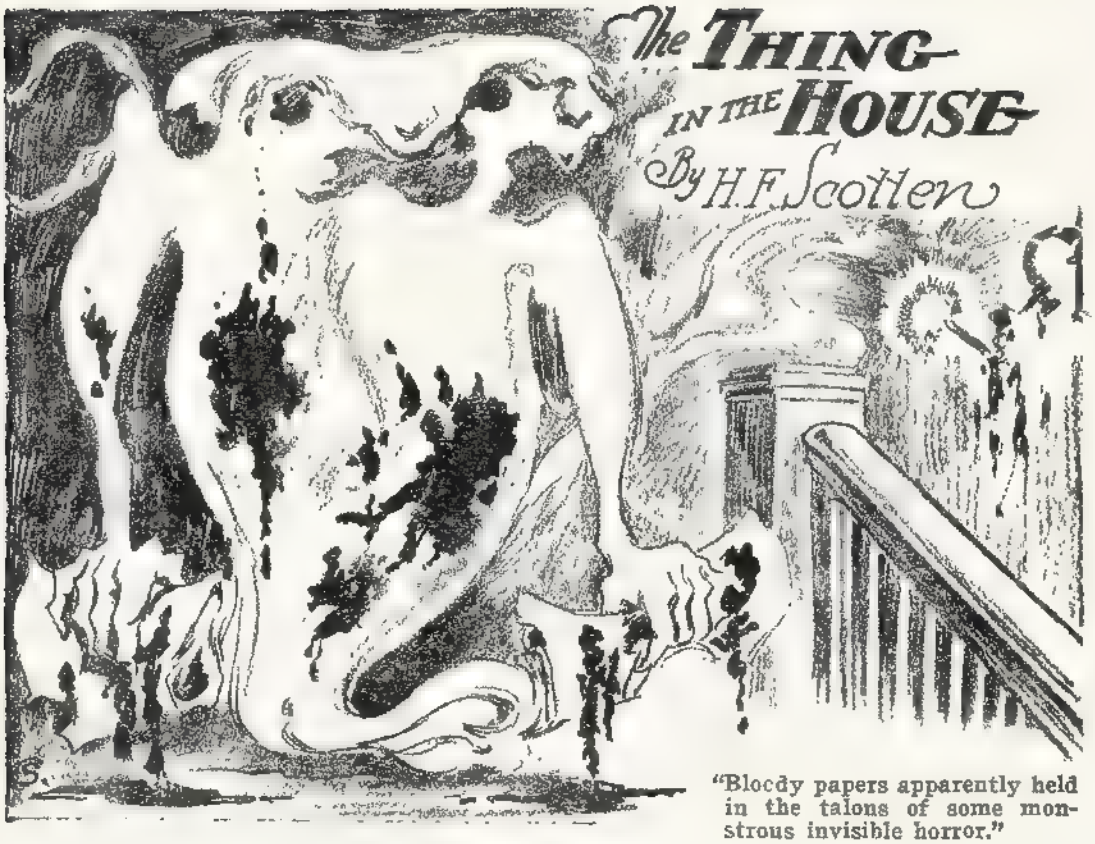
''It is so easy . . . move lightly . . . but be careful not to disturb your body or overbalance it. . . . ''

Had Diane not turned away from the door; were she not even now strolling insouciantly down Royal Street——

''Yellow Girl, you and I have had enough of farewells!''

Something left Clarke, tottered perilously on the two handbreadths of moonlight that remained, then caught the Yellow Girl by the hand and took the lead.

The blue web of the rug from Samarcand gleamed for another moment in the moonlight, then sweltered in the red glow of the mosque lamp.



"Bloody papers apparently held in the talons of some monstrous invisible horror."

"LISTEN!"

I caught at the chief's arm. Faintly, but unmistakably, across the field came the terror-laden scream of a man. The chief tensed to listen, then reached over and touched the driver of the big police car on the shoulder. The chauffeur cautiously applied the brakes; we skidded slightly, and stopped.

Peering through the driving rain, we strained our eyes across the snow-covered field at the left of the lonely country road. Presently we discerned a dark figure, running, stumbling through the slush. He scrambled over the rail fence a little ahead of us, and started down the road, his flying, frightened form plainly illuminated by our glaring headlights. He slipped, fell, then lay inert.

In a moment we were beside him, and lifted him into the car, where he sagged down on the rear seat, breathing heavily. Indistinct words tumbled from his lips; then plainly came: "Chief!—The *Thing!—Murdered!*—Don't let it——" The man groaned, and lapsed into unconsciousness.

The chief, startled at the delirious mention of his own title, hastily wiped the mud and water from the man's face, while I held a flashlight. Surprized recognition forced the exclamation, "Frankie the Frown!" Then, to me: "Doctor, this man is a notorious thief. Sounds as though he has information of importance to us. Any chance of his reviving soon?"

I made a hasty examination, and suggested, "We had better get him to my office as quickly as possible, Chief. I am afraid he will need careful attention."

Turning to the chauffeur, the chief

said quietly, "All right, Jim," and the car leapt forward toward the city through the pelting rain.

HAD I the faintest belief that there is another mind in the country capable of reproducing the terrible experiment of which I am about to write, I would secretly carry my knowledge of it to the grave. Furthermore, after reading of the tragic results of that experiment, no one but a fool would even attempt it. And now that my companions in that night's strange adventure are dead, our unspoken covenant of silence is broken, and I am at liberty to tell of the most amazing experiment the mind of man ever conceived.

My relations with the police, and particularly the detective department, of which Chief Mandell was the efficient head, had held for me a constantly increasing interest. I practised medicine, when I could not avoid that uninteresting phase of my activities, but for the past year had been applying my knowledge of psychology, metaphysics, and various other sciences, to the identifying and apprehending of criminals. In a general way, I might have been termed a criminologist, though my methods were somewhat novel. After an exhaustive study of various crimes and their perpetrators, I had found a distinct relation between certain marked features of the crime and the mental and physical characteristics of its author. This accumulated information I had built up into a science that had proved of great value to the police.

My success in this field, which, no doubt, was the direct result of the fascination it held for me, had fostered a lasting friendship between Chief Mandell and me—a friendship which needed not the discomforts of night calls or disagreeable work. We had been returning from an attempt to identify a suspect held in a neighboring city, when the bedraggled and hysterical criminal known to the police as Frankie the Frown entered my experiences. In the car with us, beside the officer driving, was McDonald, as likable, intrepid and typical a reporter as ever wielded a pencil. He was favored above all others by the chief, and few indeed were the investigations in which he did not assist us. On this particular night, we were, although as yet mercifully unaware of it, to meet the most incredible and terrifying adventure of our lives.

ARRIVING at my office, we removed the still unconscious Frankie from the car and laid him on a couch in the warm room. I set to work with stimulants and restoratives, after removing part of his wet clothing. He had been without hat or overcoat, and was chilled through and through.

I was gratified, before long, to see indications of returning consciousness in the man. Presently his eyes opened, stared vacantly at us; then he weakly attempted to arise. I helped him to sit up. His puzzled gaze rested for a moment on Mandell; then recognition dawned in his look. He sprang to his feet, and clutched at the chief's sleeve.

"Chief! You?" he cried. "The *Thing!* Did you kill it, Chief? Where is it?"

The chief forced him back on the couch. "Take it easy now, Frankie," he said. "That's better. Now tell us all about it."

Full memory, with all its horrors, then returned to him. "For God's sake, Chief, come quick; don't let it get away. It has killed the professor. I didn't do it, Chief, honest I didn't. It was the *Thing*. The professor made it, and now——"

"Wait a minute, Frankie; tell it straight now," the chief broke in. "What professor got killed, and where was it?"

"Professor Huneberg, Chief; and Dr. Rickston is dead, too, but he died

from the shock. It was at The Pines, where we lived."

I involuntarily exclaimed aloud at this startling statement. I knew these men.

"Where *we* lived?" the chief exclaimed. "What were *you* doing there?"

"I worked for them, Chief, ever since I got out of jail."

"What is this Thing, as you call it?"

"Some kind of an animal. The professor made it. You can't——"

"The professor *made* it?"

"Yes, he created it, but you——"

"Where is it now, running around loose?"

"I don't know. If it broke out of the laboratory it is probably still somewhere in the house, if it still exists. Oh, Chief, for God's sake, get out there quick! If it gets loose—it's horrible, Chief, oh——"

Frankie showed signs of becoming hysterical. He had evidently been shocked into near insanity by some horrible spectacle. How horrible, we were soon to realize.

"All right, Frankie," the chief said soothingly, "we'll go right out. Doctor, can you fix him up? We will have to take him along. Sounds like a rush order to me."

My office adjoined my living-quarters, so I procured dry shoes, a cap, and an overcoat for Frankie. His socks and coat had been drying on the radiator, and would serve. While Mac and the officer with us helped him into them, I turned to Mandell and said:

"Chief, I knew this Professor Huneberg and Dr. Rickston. They were old acquaintances of mine. Very able scientists, they were, and engaged in biological and chemical research. I had lost track of them since they retired to experiment privately. The Professor was noted for his remarkable success in his chosen work. He, I have no doubt, has been experimenting with various animals in the developing and grafting of tissue, and has probably developed a hybrid with savage tendencies, that got beyond control. I advise you to take ample precautions in attempting to subdue it."

"All right. We'll stop at the station and get a few riot guns. They ought to be precaution enough," he answered, grimly.

In a short time, the police car was again roaring through the night. We had stopped and obtained guns for all of us, except Frankie. Two patrolmen had been added to the passenger list, and we presented a formidable appearance.

Frankie, under the repeated administration of stimulants, was becoming more self-possessed, as he told of his relations with the victims of the Thing we were racing to destroy.

"Chief, it was awful," he began, and continued, rather disconnectedly: "The professor didn't mean for us to see it kill him, but the blind rolled up and——"

We waited. He covered his face with shaking hands as though to shut out the vision of that awful scene he had witnessed. In a moment he went on:

"The doctor fell. I think his heart failed. I ran to my room in the back part of the house and locked myself in. I've been there since day before yesterday. I was afraid to leave and afraid to stay. I felt like a hunted animal driven into a hole, with something about to come in after me. The picture of the professor being—being killed kept coming before my eyes.

"The thing was so powerful I was afraid it would break out of the laboratory and escape from the house. It was awful! I pictured it roaming around the country—killing, tearing, destroying. Little children, women, strong men: all helpless, and no one to know what did it! God! I tried to force myself to go back into the laboratory to reassure myself that the

thing was gone, as the professor said it would be, but I couldn't; terror gripped me at the thought of it."

We let Frankie ramble on, for a while, with his disconnected recital. Handicaped by the rain, slush, and slow-moving traffic, it would take us twenty minutes or more to reach the place of tragedy, which was, according to his directions, a few miles from the city limits on one of the lesser arterial highways. From it he had fled across more than a mile of dark, rain-lashed country to the point where we found him. I shudder to think of the consequences, had he perished there without our learning of the horror we were so dramatically to meet.

"After a few hours," Frankie continued, "I became calmer. I tried to think, to reason things out. I began to feel foolish to think I had doubted the professor's word. He was a smart man; he must have been right about the Thing. It surely was gone.

"I knew that if I left and ran away, it would only be a question of time until the bodies would be discovered. I knew you would find I had been living in the house. On account of my record you would think I had killed the doctor and professor, if there was no trace of the Thing. The evidence was all against me. I decided to write to you, Chief, and explain it all, so you could bring men and destroy the monster if it should still be in existence. I didn't want to take a chance on that, even though I was about convinced you would find no trace of it, for there would be no peace, no sanity, for me or anyone, should it happen to be there. I was going to leave this evening, after dark, and mail the letter to you from some other town. I've got it in my pocket. Here——"

His shaking fingers tried to unfasten the overcoat, but fumbled futilely at the buttons.

"Never mind, Frankie," the chief said; "you can give it to us when we get back."

"Well, anyway, in my letter I told you all about it," Frankie continued, "all about the professor's experiment, and how it killed him; but this evening, after dark, my lamp bulb burned out just as I was finishing. When I was left in the dark I went crazy with fear. I imagined the Thing was about to grab me. Again I was sure it was still in existence. I stuffed the letter in my pocket and ran from the house, blindly, terror-stricken. I remembered what the professor said about the imagination and I——"

"Wait a minute, Frankie," the chief broke in; "you are getting all excited again, and we are not getting the information we need." And to direct his mind into smoother channels, he said, "Tell us about when you went to work for the professor."

I gave Frankie a drink of brandy. His nerves quieting, he again began to talk, interrupted now and then by the screech of the siren as the car tore through the wet blackness. He told us, briefly, the history of his life from his earliest recollections; with an evident desire to excuse, or at least account for, his career of crime. He had been born in the slums. Cuffed and beaten by a drunken mother who was even ignorant of the identity of his father, he grew up in an environment that molded his criminal career. Undersized, he was bullied by other boys. He learned to hate and distrust everyone. He played a lone hand always. God knows how he survived a childhood so bitter that his face had never relaxed in a smile. He earned thus the only name he had ever known, "Frankie the Frown."

During the war, into which the draft had forcibly plunged him, his bitter sufferings and privations had produced the only longing for human sympathy and comradeship he had ever known, but his ferret face and hate-flashing eyes had turned away

any who might otherwise have "buddied" with him.

After the war, thievery and prison again. Then his release. On his way back to the miserable alleys and hovels he had known as home, walking the lonely miles that he might hoard against hunger the transportation money given him at the prison, he had stopped at the place that had become for him the only real home he had ever enjoyed. He stopped to beg food and found——

"He called me 'son', Chief," he said. "Me, with my face, Dr. Ricks-ton called 'son'! He took me in, and he and Professor Huneberg fed me. Something seemed to break inside me. I cried. I told them everything about myself, but they gave me a job. Professor said my type interested him—he wanted to study my mental 'reactions.' Their housekeeper had left, so I took her place. I could cook, and keep the house clean. They began to teach me things. I studied hard, and learned fast. I was happy."

Frankie had now grown quite calm. He went on quietly with his story, looking out into the blackness now and then to discern landmarks and judge our nearness to our destination.

"Professor was a wonderful man. I guess I was foolish to think the Thing was still alive. He said the electrons would fly apart when he died; that the monster would cease to exist."

"Cease to *exist?*"

"Yes. He made it, you know, and he let it kill him so it couldn't hurt anyone else. You see you can't——"

"All right, Frankie," the chief interrupted again, thinking he was once more becoming hysterical; "we'll soon find out for ourselves, and then we'll kill this 'Thing,' and everything will be all right. Just keep calm, now, until we get there."

If the chief hadn't been so cocksure we were merely going out to destroy some dangerous animal! If he had only let Frankie finish that last sentence, perhaps we would have been better prepared to face the awful experience we were racing into!

What did these seemingly hysterical words of Frankie's mean? I began to wonder if there was something more terribly sinister behind them than we first supposed. I could not but believe that he told the truth about the deaths of the doctor and professor. But if some kind of animal killed them, what did he mean by its "ceasing to exist"? By its electrons "flying apart"? Was his mind just a little off balance from witnessing the deaths of his benefactors? The chief regarded part of Frankie's rambling tale as pure hysteria; his job was merely to go out and kill some ferocious beast, check up on the deaths of its supposed victims, and call the coroner. More and more, as we neared the place, I sensed something mysterious, inconceivable behind it all. But speculations were idle: we would soon know all about it, do our duty, and the incident would end.

"Well, anyway," Frankie continued with his story, disregarding the chief's admonition to "be calm"; "I've written it all down in my letter. You can read it, or I can tell you about it when we get back to town. But the professor must have been right. He was too smart a man not to know what he was talking about. We probably won't find a thing."

Frankie again peered through the rain-streaked windshield. Out here in the country the slushy snow was whiter, and the flying landscape became recognizable to him.

"There's the place," he exclaimed suddenly, pointing, "back off the road in that grove of pines. They gave it its name on account of those trees. Turn in at that stone pillar. That's the driveway."

THE officer driving skilfully skidded the car into the narrow lane leading back to the house. The rapidly melting snow was unbroken by

the tracks of any vehicle, but the headlights of the car illuminated plainly the footprints of Frankie, left in his terror-stricken flight from the place.

It looked foreboding. Squatting among its guardian pines, the ancient dwelling resembled some gargantuan monster of the dark. No light showed, but as we pulled up before the front entrance, we heard the cries of various animals coming from the rear.

"Those are the professor's animals," Frankie volunteered, "the ones he used in his experiments. Poor things! I didn't dare leave my room even to feed them. They are cold and starving.

"I haven't got a key to the front door, Chief," he said as we got out of the car. "I'll go to the back, and come through and open it. No use you wading through the snow."

His fear, by this time, seemed entirely gone. In a matter-of-fact way he prepared to admit us to the house.

"Wait a minute, not so fast," the chief said, as Frankie started around the house. "Jim"—to one of the officers—"you go with him. McGruder and Flynn will station themselves on each side of the house. Shoot anything you see running from it, *and don't miss!*"

"It's all right, Chief. If it's still there, it is shut up in the laboratory," Frankie said.

"We're taking no chances. Go ahead."

Frankie and the officer whom the chief had called Jim disappeared around the side of the house. The other two withdrew a short distance where they could watch all sides, while the chief, Mac, and I waited at the front door to be admitted.

We heard a door open and close in the rear. The animals in the professor's zoo set up a great whining and crying as they heard and scented human beings moving around them.

Presently we heard footsteps and voices in the room on the other side of the door we faced. Through the cracks in the drawn blinds we saw the lights flash on. We heard Frankie's voice moan, "God! There's Dr. Rickston, just as I put him in that chair. Oh—Doctor!" Then we heard him scream: "Look! The glass in the laboratory door is broken! The Thing! It's broken out! It's alive! It's in here some——"

A scream! Frankie's scream! Then a horrible mingling of animal sounds. Roars, snarls, snapping of jaws mingled with agonized human cries in a bedlam of blood-chilling noise. Thumps, thuds; like the floor being flailed by a human body! Sharp cracks, as of breaking bones. The hoarse voice of Jim mouthing incoherent words in abject terror. Then the repeated roars from his gun, as he instinctively and blindly pulled the trigger.

The chief was battering on the door with feet and fists. "Open up!" he shouted; "open the door, Jim!"

No answer.

The sounds within died away. The last we distinguished was a low moan, then silence.

THE combined strength of the three of us in one battering rush tore off the lock, and the door swung open, revealing to our startled eyes a sight I hope never to see again. The chief called out to Flynn and McGruder: "Stay where you are, men," and turned to survey the gruesome scene.

Jim had almost reached the door in his attempt to escape. He lay against the wall in a dead faint, but otherwise unharmed. The Thing was not in sight. Sprawled in a chair in a corner was the body of a man I instantly recognized as Dr. Rickston, while in the shadow of a huge library table, over which blazed an electric fixture, lay all that remained of Frankie the Frown. Horribly mangled, broken and bleeding, he scarcely resembled a human being. His clothing was torn to ribbons, and clutched

in his hand were a few scraps of bloody paper.

The chief gently extracted these from the clenched fingers, whispering as he did so: "Part of his letter! Where's the rest of it?"

He glanced around the room, but the pages were nowhere to be seen. The chief thrust the fragments of the letter in his pocket; there was no time to look for the rest now. An unknown danger surrounded us.

Mac and I stood guard with the deadly riot guns, half expecting some inconceivable and horrible monstrosity to leap on us from some place of concealment. Tensely we listened for sounds indicating its presence. All was quiet except for the cries from small animals somewhere in the rear. Our eyes roved nervously about the room, noting the arrangement of doors and furniture. The length of the long library ran crosswise of the house. At its right end was the fatal door, the shattered glass bearing mute evidence of the Thing's escape into the library. In the wall facing us was a door leading to the rear, evidently the one through which Frankie and Jim had entered the room. It was closed. At the left end was a huge fireplace with its dead ashes, occupying most of the wall space. Near the hearth a flight of steps with open balustrade rose, paused at a landing, and turning, continued upward to the right until they disappeared above the ceiling level. An unlighted wall bracket hung over the landing to light the stairs. To our left, heavily curtained windows broke the front wall of the house beside the door we had entered. In spite of the more shocking objects, my eyes rested on and noted such incongruous things as an emergency gasoline student's lamp resting on the mantel, pictures on the wall, and books and magazines on the table. Where was the awful beast? The darkened laboratory at our right, with its broken glass door, held terrifying possibilities.

The chief moved cautiously toward the laboratory door, lips compressed in deadly determination. We flanked his movements with ready weapons. It was evident that the laboratory and the upstairs rooms furnished the only possible hiding-place of the beast.

Trembling with excitement, we neared the broken door. The chief threw a ray from his flashlight through the jagged opening. Nothing was seen of the beast as he swept it about the room. He reached through and released the lock, cautiously swung open the door, and finding a switch beside it, pressed it and flooded the room with light. We entered and found ourselves in a marvelously well-equipped laboratory.

A barred window, with rain-streaked panes, was opposite the door we had entered. Another door, open, at the left, or back end of the room, revealed an iron grating through which came the distressed cries of various animals. This grating was closed and locked. I gasped with dismay at the litter of broken instruments, test-tubes, and beautiful scientific equipment scattered about. The room was a wreck.

Looking around, we found the body of Professor Huneberg crumpled on the floor between the large work-table and the window. "All dead!" the chief muttered, after his quick glance disproved the possibility of the beast's presence in the laboratory.

The professor's cold form had also been brutally torn and broken, but like the doctor, he had ceased breathing at least thirty-six hours before. Saddened beyond measure, I almost forgot the necessity of quickly finding and destroying the cause of this carnage. I was visualizing that magnificent physique as it had been in life. His six feet of powerful frame had borne a proud head with its dark beard and hair, and eyes that flashed with almost unearthly intelligence from the wonderful brain behind them. In appearance he was the very

opposite of the doctor, who, with his mild blue eyes, white hair and beard, and frail form, presented a sharp contrast to his companion.

The chief, after his hurried examination, abruptly left the room, and was followed by Mac. I took one more hasty look about, and followed them, snapping off the light and partially closing the door.

The chief was again examining Frankie's body. He arose and silently pointed to a narrow streak of bloodstain that ran in a line toward the stairs. He moved toward them, Mac and I following, but I confess with less bravado than his stalwart form presented. At the foot of the step he paused, and spoke gravely, "Men, we don't know what kind of beast this is we are about to face. There is not the slightest doubt that it is lurking upstairs, probably in the hall. From the appearance of its victims, it kills differently, more brutally, than anything I ever saw before. You must be right, Doctor; it surely is a hybrid of the professor's developing. What horrible shape he gave it we can only conjecture—until we see it.

"I will go upstairs—there is not room in the hall for three of us to fight it—and if my shots don't stop it, I will retreat. You and Mac stand where you can shoot through the balustrade. If it gets past us we still have Flynn and McGruder outside."

We started to protest, but he waved us to silence, and finding a switch that lighted the wall bracket at the landing, began to mount the stairs, gun ready for instant action. He turned at the landing and continued upward, his head and shoulders disappearing above the ceiling level, but his feet and legs still visible through the balustrade as, step by step, he approached the top. Now they too were gone, and we heard his soft footfalls in the hall above. Then silence.

We held our breaths. We listened apprehensively for the expected burst of shots that would tell of his meeting with the monster.

THE sound of his footsteps resumed. Our eyes were glued to that last visible point of steps where their angle met the ceiling line. In a moment a foot appeared there, feeling cautiously for the next step down. He was coming down, *backward,* without firing a shot!

Slowly, uncertainly, the other foot appeared, and felt behind its mate for a lower step. What did the chief see? Why didn't he shoot?

Slowly, hesitatingly, grudgingly, he backed down to the landing, and then his body came into view, arm rigidly holding the gun-butt against his shoulder, pointing the weapon upstairs. He held his flashlight in the other hand. A look of puzzled amazement shone from his distended eyes. For a moment he paused at the landing, and then continued, still backward, down to where we stood. Trembling slightly, though I was sure not from fear, he stood still, holding gun and eyes on the landing.

"For God's sake, Chief, what is it?" Mac whispered.

He did not answer.

I was watching that last visible step, momentarily expecting to see a hairy paw come into view as the beast descended. My hands gripped my weapon like steel vises. In silence we waited—waited.

Suddenly, above the landing, appeared something floating, swaying, in midair. The light from the bracket fell full upon it, a mass of something white and black, with red splotches. It was a scrap of cloth and a handful of torn, bloody papers, *apparently held in the talons of some monstrous, inconceivable, invisible horror!*

"There's your *animal!*" the chief gritted through clenched teeth.

"Damn!" Mac whispered. "You can't *see* it!"

We stood paralyzed with astonish-

ment. Incredulity, amazement, horror must have mingled on our countenances, as we waited.

A low growling, a snapping of invisible jaws smote our ears. A stench, putrid, nauseating, spread and filled the room until my stomach retched. Then: "Look," Mac whispered. The light bracket was bending slowly downward—bending, as though the metal tubing was melting, and too soft to hold up the socket and shade. It bent and twisted until the wires were short-circuited, a fuse blew out, and the room was plunged into inky blackness.

"Light that lamp!" the chief shouted, and sought to throw the beam of his flashlight on the stairs. Only a moment it burned, and then failed. Again the darkness, broken this time by jets of flame as the chief fired blindly at the thing on the landing. He hurled the useless flashlight after the streams of lead. It thudded against the wall and fell to the landing. With its characteristic stubbornness it again lit up, and threw a spot of light against the baseboard. In the reflected light we saw the mass of bloody papers and bit of cloth describing grotesque gyrations in the air above the steps.

The Thing was making the air hideous with its screams and awful stench. We backed hastily away to the center of the room. Intermittent flares from Mac's matches, as he struggled with the refractory lamp, only made the almost total darkness more sinister, more fraught with the terror of a possible overwhelming rush from the invisible monster.

After what seemed hours, Mac succeeded in coaxing a flame from the mantle of the lamp, and as he placed it on the table, we saw the bloody scraps of cloth and paper floating swiftly and jerkily toward us. We backed to the open front door, and halted there.

The chief coolly and methodically emptied his gun at the screams and snarls coming from the thin air before us. Mac did the same. Then the roar of my gun drowned the unearthly cries. Plaster and pictures fell from the wall opposite, but the cloth and papers still hovered above the table! Why the Thing did not overwhelm us in one savage rush I do not know.

We hastily reloaded our guns in the face of Mac's sudden exclamation, "My God! You can't kill it!"

Jim had by this time revived from his faint, and with a look of unutterable horror in his eyes, he dashed headlong from the house, and was taken in charge by Flynn. McGruder came up on the porch, and staring through the door, watched the unusual battle with unbelieving eyes, too much astonished to take part.

Again we directed a roaring but hopeless fusillade at that horrible unseen presence. Amid a bedlam of sound, the roar of our guns commingling with screams and shrieks from our maddened, invisible target, the lamp was suddenly raised from the table, suspended a second in midair, and sent by an unseen force hurtling, crashing into the wall at our left. There it exploded.

Burning splashes of gasoline scattered all over the room, igniting everything they touched. Frantically we slapped at our burning clothing, sustaining, luckily, but few burns. The room was in flames. We removed our coats, and beat at the fire, but it was a hopeless task to subdue it.

Through the smoke, I saw the floating scraps of cloth and paper move swiftly toward the laboratory door. The door swung open, the bloody mass disappeared into the darkened room, and the door slammed shut. I heard the crash of glass in the laboratory. The Thing was trapped in there. Possibly the fire would accomplish what we had failed to do.

Driven to the open, we were helpless to drag out the corpses, helpless to do anything but watch, as the old

mansion became a roaring furnace, and its surrounding guardian pines flaming torches.

Flames soon burst out from the barred laboratory window, and as a last high-pitched scream from within died away, we were sure, and were devoutly thankful, that the Thing was not invulnerable. The fire had destroyed it.

Mac turned to the chief.

"Chief," he said, "Frankie's letter is gone. Now we'll never know what the Thing——"

"But," interrupted Mandell, "you owe your life to the fact that the Thing happened to retain the letter in its claws when it tore Frankie to pieces. I shudder to think of our fate had its presence not been made known to us by those bloody papers."

What was this inconceivable entity whose terrific power we had just seen? What miraculous knowledge had the professor possessed to bring into being this awful thing? What had been his purpose? Would his secret ever be discovered? A dozen such unanswerable questions flashed through my mind. The fact that we could not kill it was not so unreasonable. Any concentrated force composed of coherent atoms could conceivably be of such tenuous construction that it would be invisible. Electricty, magnetism, and various rays are all evidences of some invisible, yet potent forces. The puzzle was, how could the professor create a center of power, and lend it the attributes of some hideous beast? My mind wrestled in vain with the problem.

A few hours later, a trio of mystified men—the chief, Mac, and I—were deciphering the few and half-effaced words on the scraps of Frankie's letter which the chief had salvaged from his dead fingers. Just enough of them were legible to whet still more our curiosity regarding the origin of the Thing. They were few, indeed, but they carried a hint of some terrible experiment. We dared not make public the true facts of the night's experiences.

THE next morning, Mac and I visited the scene of the fire with the coroner. The little that was left of the victims sickened me. Mac was poking about among the ruins with a stick. I saw him stoop, turn over a charred board, pick something from among the debris and thrust it hastily in his pocket. He came quickly to where I stood, well out of earshot of the coroner and his helpers.

"I've got 'em!" he whispered excitedly; "the pages of Frankie's letter. The Thing must have broken the window and dropped them outside before the fire got to them. A falling board flattened them into the snow, and they were saved."

We hastened back to town, and hurried to the chief's office to tell him the news, and read, together, the explanation of the Thing's existence. Again we were bitterly disappointed. It was impossible to read the story on those blood-stained, water-soaked and torn sheets of paper. Only a comparatively few words were legible.

Mac was downcast. "What a story! What a whale of a story!" he grieved. "If only——"

"Yes," the chief answered, "but you wouldn't dare print it."

"I guess you are right, Chief, but I could *read* it."

"You may yet have that privilege," I said, gathering up the pages, and accepting from the chief the other scraps he had put in his desk. "I will see what the judicious use of a few acids will do toward making these readable."

For days I worked. It was a tedious, laborious task, but I succeeded. Mac called each day, and pleaded to be permitted to read the pages as I restored them, but I forced him to wait until the whole was finished.

At last it was done, and I held the patched and stained, but legible pages in my hand. What a grisly relic

they were! Drenched in their writer's blood, borne aloft in the unseen claws of that awful monster, miraculously saved from the fire, those pages carried words that were indelibly printed upon my memory, until I could have quoted them verbatim. Never can they be erased from my memory.

That evening I had guests—just two: Mac and Chief Mandell. Well they knew why they had been invited. Both illy concealed their burning curiosity regarding the story I was to read them. I could not resist the temptation to heighten the drama by keeping them in suspense. Leisurely I reached into a desk drawer, and then held up to their gaze those gruesome pages.

Each, for a moment, held the sheaf of papers in a trembling hand. I knew that they were visualizing them as they had first seen them, floating, jerking in midair, clutched in the claw of that mysterious entity whose secret the blurred words were now about to reveal.

I TOOK the pages, settled myself in a chair, and prepared to read. The chief stood on the hearth, back to the fire, nervously teetering on heels and toes. Mac restlessly paced a short journey between table and bookcase, back and forth.

The letter, like a message from the dead, began:

"Chief Mandell:

"For God's sake, heed these words! I am hiding in the room of a house in which lie the bodies of Professor Alexis Huneberg and Dr. Artemus J. Rickston. In the laboratory, with the body of the professor, there lurks, I am afraid, the horrible monster of his creation that killed him. If it still exists, and should escape, God pity the world! Through the highways and byways would it stalk, tearing limb from limb all whom it should meet, and none to know what it was; for, Chief, this monster is invisible!

"I am almost crazed with fear, but I must write this, and you must believe it, for the safety of thousands may depend on your accepting what I tell you as the truth. Also, there will be no rest for me, no sanity, until I know if this Thing is still alive, or non-existent. I have tried a dozen times to force myself to go back into that awful room to find out, but I am afraid. My legs fail me, my nerves collapse. Then, too, when the bodies are found, and my presence here becomes known, I would be hunted, always, as a murderer, if the monster does not now exist. My black record would be sufficient to convict me; for you know me, Chief—I am Frankie the Frown.

"I can't stay here much longer. I have no food, and no water. Terror lurks in the rest of the house; I dare not leave this room. But tonight I'll run from the house, and mail this letter to you from another town.

"You must believe this, Chief, and bring men to destroy this awful monster. I don't know how you will do it, but I'll tell all I know about it, and maybe you can consult some scientist, and find a way.

"God! I can hardly write.

"I'll tell you how I came to be here, Chief, and then you will know I did not kill the doctor and professor. You will know that I could not turn against, and destroy, the only friends I ever had. No, Chief, it was the monster. Please believe me.

"I came here when I got out of jail, a little over a year ago."

Here followed a more detailed account of Frankie's meeting with his benefactors, an enlargement of the story he had told us in the speeding police car; of how they had befriended him; of his regeneration. He told of his studies under the gentle tutelage of Dr. Rickston; of how he assisted Professor Huneberg in his experiments; of how he grew to almost worship these two venerable men, the first humans to show him any love, to call him "son". We could picture

him locked in that little room, blinds drawn, lights burning night and day, pitifully terrified, but heroically writing; that the world might be made safe from this Thing, and that the stigma of murder be not attached to him, whose soul had been cleansed, and whose honor reclaimed through the benevolence of his friends.

I take up the thread of his story further along in its pages:

"I had been here about nine months when I noticed a subtle change in the professor.

"I had by this time laid the foundation for a good education. My starved mind seemed to soak up knowledge as a sponge does water. I became intensely interested in my employers' work, having grasped, by this time, some understanding of their various experiments. The professor's work, especially, fascinated me. He practised what he called painless vivisection on animal after animal. The brain was his especial study. Time after time I had seen him remove parts of the skull from different species of monkey, carefully parting the convolutions of the brain-matter, holding life in the body until the last possible moment, only to shake his head in disappointment, and plunge again into study. One day I asked him what he was searching for, and he said, 'The secret of life, my boy.' I was not surprized, and such was my confidence in him that I did not doubt he would find it. He did.

"But a change came over him. He became silent, moody. His eyes continually carried a far-away look, into which at times came a glance of fear. This became more marked as the days went by. He lost weight, ate little, seemed to be losing health rapidly. The doctor was deeply engrossed in some important work of his own, and did not notice it. I began to worry.

"It was one night in the fall when the thing happened that made me doubt his sanity—and mine, too, for that matter.

"We had retired early; the doctor and professor in their bedrooms upstairs, and I in my room here on the ground floor. I could not sleep, and after two hours or so of tossing about, arose and wandered into the living-room, thinking to read awhile. Before I could turn on the light, I heard a voice in the laboratory. It was the professor's. I stepped softly to the open door, wondering whom he could be talking to. There were no lights in there either, but the moon shone brightly through the barred window, and I could see everything plainly. The professor was standing by the work-table, one hand resting on its glass top and the other pointing a long finger at the iron grating which covered the open door into the zoo. I held my breath. He seemed to be talking to the animals—in his sleep. But no; his eyes were bright, intelligence shone from them. What were these strange words he was saying? . . .

"'Ah, you are there. I can not see you, but I know you exist, beast of beasts. In my mind's eye, I see your form taking shape. Would that I could see you in reality, monster. But no; on second thought, perhaps the sight of your hideous form in the flesh would be too awful for mere human to behold and remain sane. Now your presence manifests itself. The monkeys are cowering in paralyzed and silent terror in their cages; your horrible stench chokes my nostrils; your jaws snap; your claws rake the floor as you throw your invisible bulk against the bars——'

"Chief, I stood frozen to the spot. I swear that as he spoke I breathed in a reeking stink, like comes from a long-dead body taken from the sea. I heard a snapping of jaws and a furious scratching on the floor beyond the iron grating. Something shook and rattled the barred door. The passage on the other side of it was plainly illuminated by the moon-

beams, but *nothing was there; something invisible was shaking those bars!* The professor's voice went on:

"'Ah, what a triumph for the mind of man! Created, actually created from the emanations from the chemical of life! You are powerful—oh, how powerful!—but the mind of man is more powerful still, for I control your existence, and keep you behind those bars. But I am puzzled to know what use to make of you. If I could devise a means to multiply and control you, all the armies of the world would be helpless; at my mercy. Ah, what a thought! what an instrument for the abolition of militarism and war would you be! But—I admit it—I am afraid of you. I feel a slight weakness in concentrating on the thought that you are behind those bars. I played with the thought of what you would do to me if I materialized you here in the laboratory. And the fact that I incorporated the Horla in your make-up I regret, for the Horla was a nemesis—de Maupassant could not overcome it, and finally committed suicide. Ah, I wonder if I shall have to—but not yet, not yet, beast of beasts! I must plan first whether it be safe to give you to the world of science, and——'

"That is all that I heard—that night. Finding strength to move, I fled in silent fear to my room. I could not shut out from my mind the picture of the professor talking to that stinking, invisible thing that clawed the floor, and shook the bars of the iron grating. Amazement and terror gripped me. I slept little that night.

"The next morning, I approached the zoo at feeding-time reluctantly, but everything seemed to be in order. The monkeys and other animals seemed to have forgotten their terror of the night, but on this side of the iron grating, plainly imprinted in the sawdust on the floor, were strange, grotesque footprints! With a shuddering foot, I obliterated them.

"Fearing to cause him unnecessary worry, I said nothing of the night's experience to the doctor. The professor looked haggard, but a strange light gleamed in his eyes.

"For several nights after that, he crept down to the laboratory; there to hold practically the same conversation with the Thing, which seemed to come into being at his will. Each night I followed him, and listened until my trembling nerves forced me to flee to my room. How he produced the phenomenon I did not then learn, and I dared not ask him.

"After three or four nights of eavesdropping came the gruesome end of these nightly visits.

"I HAD followed the professor's clandestine footsteps as usual, but when I softly crept to the laboratory door, he was not in sight. A noise in the zoo drew my eyes to the grating. It was open. Presently he came into view leading Chika, the largest of his collection of monkeys. He then fastened the poor beast to the grating with a short chain. Stepping into the laboratory, he closed and locked the grating, and stood for a moment gazing through the bars at the trembling monkey. The professor moved to the work-table, turned, and again faced the grating. Chika, on the zoo side of the bars, clung to them, whimpering, and peered piteously between them at his master. Instinct must have warned him of a terrible fate.

"The professor began to speak; to summon, from God knows where, that awful, foul-smelling, invisible horror. In a moment my startled eyes saw the monkey rise quickly into midair, where he hung, suspended, twisting and squirming. Again terror possessed me, and I fled, the beast's smothered shrieks in my ears.

"The next morning, my worst fears were justified: Chika was gone. The professor muttered something about

the monkey taking sick in the night; fearing contagion, he said, he had taken him out and buried him. But in the sawdust on the floor before the grating I found a hairy foot, with dangling bloody tendons! I almost cried aloud in horror at this discovery. I decided that the awful experiment must stop. I would tell the doctor. I would face the professor with my knowledge of it, and beg and plead with him to stop his nightly creation of the monster. I had ceased to wonder how he did it, in face of the increasing horror of the situation. I then decided to delay telling the doctor about it, but that night I would follow the professor to the laboratory, and boldly present myself before he had time to demonstrate his uncanny power.

"After retiring, I lay listening for his soft footfalls, as he would pass through the hall above my head. I did not hear them. Long after the usual time for his nightly visit to the laboratory, I listened. He did not go. Sleep finally claimed me.

"Abruptly I was thrust back into consciousness by a shrill scream. It was repeated. I leaped from bed and dashed upstairs. The doctor's voice drew me into the professor's room, where he was soothing and quieting the terror-stricken man. 'Nightmare,' the doctor said, and after a few moments' conversation, we again retired.

"This was the beginning of a series of nightly disturbances of like nature, in which it became more and more difficult to rouse the professor from these awful experiences. They did not seem like nightmares to me, but rather the screams of terror from a man who, wide-awake but helpless, sees some nocturnal, but real, horror about to overwhelm him.

"The professor's clandestine visits to the laboratory ceased, but each night we were awakened by his screams. Day by day he declined in health. The doctor, alarmed at his condition, vainly attempted to diagnose his ailment, but could learn nothing, increasingly mystified by the recurrent nightmares.

"At last came the incident that preceded the tragedy. Day before yesterday, it was. It seems weeks.

"The professor, looking wan and haggard, was in the laboratory. The doctor sat at one end of the library table, examining various medical works, his mind on the professor's ailment. At the other end of the table I sat studying. I glanced through the open door into the laboratory, where the professor was peering through the microscope at a bit of chemical on a slide. Something in his attitude caught, and held, my attention. He raised his head as if to rest his eyes. I saw him wearily pass his hand across them, then look absently into the zoo. Suddenly he stiffened, his eyes bulged in horror as though beholding some awful menace. He suddenly flung out his hands before him in a gesture of defense, and then —screamed! We ran in, caught his flailing arms, and, with difficulty, finally quieted him. We led him into the library, and laid him on the couch. The doctor administered a sedative, and he rested quietly for a half-hour.

"We were astonished at this coming on him in the daytime. Now we knew it was no ordinary nightmare. We feared the worst: he was going insane. While we were discussing, in whispers, his trouble, the professor sat up and spoke:

" 'This is the end, my dear friends. I can resist it no longer. Tomorrow I shall tell you all. I shall reveal to you the most astonishing discovery the world of science has ever known, and then take my departure into that spiritual world where the soul is at peace, undisturbed by the turbulent emotions and ambitions of this mortal mind. And now, Doctor, if you will give me a sleeping draft, and stay by me through the evening and night,

I believe I can rest, and disturb you no more.'

"What did he mean? What was this discovery? Was he going to die? How? I knew, of course, that this horrible experiment was what he spoke of, but why was there no way out? I still delayed telling the doctor of what I knew, thinking the professor would reveal all, and then he would know just what to do.

"The professor rested well that night, and the next morning he was more cheerful, although quiet. He spent most of the day in going over his private affairs, placing certain legal papers in a large envelope which he handed to the doctor, saying, 'You may open them after I am gone, and dispose of my possessions not mentioned therein as you see fit, Doctor. As you know, I have no relatives.'

"We were stunned by his calm preparations for death; we couldn't believe it. Aimlessly the doctor and I dragged out the day. A dread of impending calamity loaded down our hearts.

"Late in the afternoon, the professor called us around the big library table, and after we were seated, spent a few moments in silent meditation. Then he began his amazing explanation. I'll try to write it in his own words as accurately as possible, Chief, for you may have to call in some scientist to find a way to destroy the monster, if the professor was wrong and it still exists.

" 'I had hoped,' the professor began, 'to overcome the weakness that drew my mind into dangerous channels, but I find it impossible. Voluntarily I shall become a martyr to science, and by so doing remove from you a very real danger, that—God forgive me!—I myself created.

" 'Doctor, I am confident that I have discovered the true secret of life itself, and that Frankie here may understand it I will word my explanation in the simplest form possible.

" 'Science has determined that all substance is made up of cohering atoms, which in turn are, individually, miniature solar systems, with their planetlike electrons revolving around a sunlike nucleus. Science has also practically decided that these cohering atoms vibrate at various rates. Therefore we must conclude that all living creatures, composed of various substances with their vibrating atoms, depend upon vibrations for life. Life is vibration.

" 'Now, we naturally demand to know what sets up and maintains that vibration. Ah, when we find the answer to that question, we will have delved as deeply as it is possible to go into the secret of life. I am sure that I have found that answer!'

"The professor paused for a moment, and then went on:

" 'Imagine a machine, an intricate, marvelously constructed machine; for example, the human body. It is the most wonderful we know of. To live, to move, its atoms must constantly vibrate. Whence comes, and what is, the force that energizes them? My theory, which I have proved to my own satisfaction, is this:

" 'Deep within the machine, in a hidden compartment probably in the brain, lies a bit of intensely radioactive mineral. So intensely radioactive is it, that if we were to break open the machine to find it, it would, upon being exposed, immediately disintegrate. Now let us see how it produces life.

" 'The bit of mineral, at its normal rate of disintegration, bombards the atoms of the machine with constant streams of flying particles, or electrons, analogous to the comets we see flashing through our solar system. We have a comparison in the similar action of a bit of radium. However, unlike radium, our life-giving mineral can never be isolated and analyzed because of its extreme radio-activity.

" 'Under the ceaseless hammering of the streams of electrons from the mineral, the atoms in the human ma-

chine vibrate, the machine moves, and there we have life! Finally the bit of mineral is exhausted. No longer are the atoms bombarded with its flying particles; they cease to vibrate; the machine stops, rusts away, disintegrates; and there we have death!

" 'But what becomes of the electrons thrown off from the bit of life-giving mineral? Ah, again like those mysterious wanderers, the comets, they journey on an inconceivable orbit. But eventually, as willed or directed by some supreme Intelligence, they come together, collide, are fused into a new mass in an embryo, and again take up the work of producing the life-giving vibrations in a new human machine. Do you not see how this all fits in with the half-believed theory that our own solar system is but an atom in some vast cosmic body?

" 'Human intelligence—the mind, the soul, or whatever name we give it—seems to be a force within, yet not an integral part of the machine. My theory is that it is an induction, a sort of magnetic field, produced by the whirring flight of the flying particles of mineral. We know that an induced or secondary current of electricity, if properly collected and brought to bear on the primary or producing current, can materially disturb its progress. Now, the mind, or thought, can have a similar effect on the flying electrons from the bit of radio-active mineral. In fact, intense concentration can control, to a certain extent, their orbit, or arrest, temporarily, their flight through space. Telepathy, the power of mind over matter, faith-healing, and other more or less proven powers of the mind illustrate this. Perhaps this proves the Biblical assertion that man is made in the likeness of God, whose supreme Intelligence directs and controls the electronlike comets of a great cosmic body. Though it grieves me to be compelled to shock you with the tragedy of it, I am about to give you a practical demonstration of my theory.

" 'As a child, I was endowed with an unusual imagination. Growing to manhood, this characteristic developed into an ability to concentrate thought to the nth degree. When I formed my theory of life, I set about to prove it. Not being able to find the mysterious mineral in the bodies of animals by vivisection because of its extreme radio-activity, I went on to the next step in the experiment, which was to attempt to arrest and control, and form into some active organization, the flying electrons through intense concentration.

" 'I had always been interested in tales of the bizarre, the mysterious. My imagination would run rampant in picturing their grotesque subjects. From them I conceived the idea of creating a creature whose main characteristic would be—invisibility! I selected Bierce's sharp-fanged and colorless enigma, *The Damned Thing;* F. Marion Crawford's slimy, powerful, and noisome horror in *The Upper Berth;* and the intangible, persistent *Horla* of de Maupassant. I imagined a combination of this horrific trio; I concentrated on that mental picture; the flight of emanating particles of mineral from the lode in my brain was arrested; they formed into a gaseous, invisible mass; and—it came into being!

" 'I protected myself by visualizing the horror beyond the barred door in the passage to the zoo. I saw the sawdust on the floor fly from under the scratching claws of *The Damned Thing!* I smelt the nauseating stench from the creature of *The Upper Berth* as it shook the iron bars of the grating! I felt the terrifying unseen presence of *The Horla!* God! It was uncanny; and although I was elated at the proving of my theory, I was much afraid, and came quickly from the laboratory. My mind drawn away from concentration, the particles or

electrons were released from its restraining power; they resumed their flight, and the invisible creature ceased to be!

"'But I was fascinated by the experiment. Something went wrong with my usually calm reasoning; my mind ran wild, and nightly I repeated, with growing perfection, the creation of that unseen horror. Finally, to test its power, I took the monkey Chika from his cage, tied him to the bars of the grating, went into the laboratory, and watching, concentrating, saw, through the bars, poor Chika literally torn to pieces by the unnamable terror I had brought into being!'

"The professor paused, and mopped, with shaking hand, a damp brow. The doctor was gazing at him with a strange, fascinated look in his wild eyes, but said nothing. The professor continued:

"'That was enough. I quit my terrible experimenting — too late! Then came the nightmares. But you were wrong in calling them that. They were the result of my inability to keep my mind from the Thing. I would, without volition, begin its creation in my bedroom. Terrorized, I would cry out; you would come to me, and my mind would be drawn away from it. After yesterday's experience in the laboratory, I fully realized the danger. It was inevitable that the Thing would get beyond my control. You, Doctor and Frankie, were in constantly increasing danger. And so this is the end. I shall go into the laboratory, bring this Thing into being for the last time, and allow it to destroy this human machine of mine. After which, of course, the electrons forming it will be released from the control of my mind, resume their flight, and the danger will be forever removed. That is all.'

"The doctor and I, when he had finished, sat amazed, as though turned to stone. I believed implicitly the incredible story because of the things I had seen, but the doctor, finally speaking, found a flaw in the professor's reasoning. With trembling voice, he spoke:

"'But, Professor, are you quite sure the emanations from the mineral will be released after death? May not the electrons continue to form the Thing, and it remain in existence, forever presenting an invincible menace to all mankind?'

"'Yes, Doctor, I am quite sure,' he answered. 'You have seen that I have brought it into existence several times, yet it does not now exist. That proves your fears are groundless.'

"'I know that it does not now exist, Professor, but may it not have ceased to be at the end of each materialization because you *willed* it so? If the mind could bring it into being, it may be necessary for it also to will it *out* of existence. Thus, if you die with this horror extant, its form may remain indefinitely as you created it, because of the lack of further control from your mind. This could easily be possible, as witness the electrons revolving around the nucleus in an atom, or the comets racing on definite orbits through myriad universes; once set on a course, they continue to follow it.'

"'No, Doctor, I am sure I am right. The time grows short, or I might be able to refute your theory by reasoning. Instead, I will prove its fallacy by demonstration. I am afraid my mind will not remain much longer in control. To avoid danger, I must go; I must say good-bye.'

"'No! No!' we cried, springing up in grief-stricken protest. He willed us to silence with upraised palm, as he drew his once magnificent form to its full height. With solemn voice, he again spoke:

"'Doctor, we have been lifelong friends. Your companionship has meant more to me than I can express in words. Together we have worked to increase knowledge, and our labors

have been not all in vain. But to you shall be given the honor of announcing my discovery to the world of science. It is well; I would not have it otherwise. To me the discovery justifies the end. *Sic itur ad astra*—thus one goes to the stars; such is the way to immortality.'

"Turning to me he said: 'My boy, your life here with us has given the lie to those who would say, "Ye can not be born again," and if I had any part in your regeneration, I have been amply repaid by your devotion to us, and your unselfish ministrations to me in my affliction. I charge you with the duty of remaining with the doctor, and comforting him in his declining years, which can not be so very numerous.'

"Then his voice grew stern as he spoke further: 'Do not, under any circumstances, come into the laboratory until it is all over; until silence within betokens all danger past. Again, my dear friends, farewell!'

"He gripped our hands firmly, and stepped quickly into the laboratory. Closing the door, he drew the blind over its glass panel. For a moment we were paralyzed with fear of what was about to happen; then with a common impulse we sprang to the door, where some unseen power seemed to hold us back. Of course we could do nothing, even had we had the power to think coherently.

"Within, all was quiet for a few moments. Presently I detected that terribly nauseating odor creeping from the crack under the door. Then came a hoarse cry and a dull thud, as though the professor had fallen. The jar released the catch on the blind, and it snapped up, revealing to our startled eyes a sight that I hope no man ever sees again.

"The professor was supine on the floor, writhing and twisting into horribly grotesque attitudes. His eyes, filled with indescribable terror, were seemingly gazing into a face just above his, but we could see no other presence in the room. His mouth was opening slowly, forced by an invisible pry. The cords stood out from his neck, as the muscles involuntarily resisted the action. Slowly the lower jaw came down. Wider opened his mouth, until the bones parted with a sickening crack, and the chin lay loosely on the throat.

"We gasped in horror, rooted to the spot. The doctor moaned in sickened pity. A terrible fascination seemed to hold our eyes on the frightful scene.

"Mingled with the inarticulate cries and moans from the professor, we heard a continuous snarling and snapping from unseen jaws. Great blood-spurting gashes appeared all over his body, as clothing and flesh were ripped to ribbons. His legs and arms were moving about, assuming tortuous positions, the bones crunching and snapping between invisible fangs. Mauled and torn, gashed and broken, the poor tortured body was suddenly flung upward, suspended in midair, then began to bend and double, backward, head and shoulders meeting the hips as the spine broke with a sickening report. The bleeding and shapeless corpse of the professor fell to the floor, and the sacrifice was ended.

"The doctor released his deathlike grip on my arm, and staggered backward. Before I could catch him, he fainted, and fell heavily, his head striking the library table. I lifted him and placed him in a chair, but death was already glazing his eyes. As I saw that, all reason left my benumbed brain, and I fled, screaming, to my room, where I am now hiding and writing this.

"But, Chief, maybe the doctor was right. Maybe that Thing is still in there, alive. If it is, God help——"

THUS, abruptly, the letter ended. At this point Frankie's light had burned out, and left him in the dark;

terror had overwhelmed him, and snatching up the pages, he had fled.

As I finished reading the astounding explanation of the horror that had so nearly overcome us, I raised my eyes and looked at Mac and the chief. They were gazing in open-mouthed wonder at the pages in my hand. I held them toward the fire in a suggestive gesture. They nodded; I dropped them on the coals. In a moment a little mass of glowing ashes was all that met our staring and meditative gaze.

Folks Used to Believe

by ALVIN F. HARLOW

The Cockatrice

A FABULOUS animal which was believed in by many until comparatively recent times was a cockatrice. In the Middle Ages it was supposed to have the head, feet, wings and body of a barnyard cock save that it had scales instead of feathers; but its body tapered into a long, scaly tail like a dragon's. Its origin is thus described in an old manuscript:

"When a cock is past seven years old, an egg grows within him, whereat he greatly wonders. He seeks privately a place on a dunghill or in a stable and scratches a hole for a nest, to which he goes ten times daily. A toad privately watches him and examines the nest every time the cock leaves it, to see if the egg yet be laid. When the toad finds the egg, he rejoices much, and at length hatches it, producing an animal with the head, neck and breast of a cock and from thence downwards the body of a serpent. And that is a Cockatrice." But by the early part of the Eighteenth Century, zoologists agreed that this idea of a cockatrice was erroneous; it had no feet or legs and was more like a snake.

It is thus described in a book on zoology published in 1759: "The Cockatrice is called the King of Serpents, not from his Bigness, for he is much inferior in this Respect to a great many Serpents; but because of his majestic Pace, for he does not creep upon the Ground like other Serpents, but goes half upright; for which Cause all other Serpents avoid him." The author then describes the production of the beast, substantially as it is given above. "Some are of the opinion," he adds, "that the Cock that leys the Egg, sits upon and hatches it himself. . . . The Cockatrice is about half a Foot in length; the hinder Part like a Serpent, the fore Part like a Cock. These Monsters are bred in Africa and some other Parts of the World. Authors differ about the Bigness of it; some say it is a Span in Compass and half a Foot long; others will have it to be three or four Feet long, and some the Thickness of a Man's Wrist and proportionable in Length. The Eyes of a Cockatrice are red. Its Poison is so strong that there is no Cure for it. The Poison infects the Air to that Degree that no other Creature can live near him. It kills not only by his Touch, but by Sight and Hissing."

What Strange Horror Lurked Above It?

The Bed of Shadows

By **FRED R. FARROW, JR.**

MARCH 6th. At last, after two months of sleeping on a cot, I am back in my own room again. It has been completely redecorated and refurnished. First of all, it now boasts a real fireplace, not one of those make-believe electric affairs, but one with andirons and a screen. How cozy it will be to read by its flickering light on long winter nights!

The walls are paneled in driftwood oak up to within two feet of the ceiling, which is papered in some odd design. The furniture, selected by my sister Myra, is of the Early Colonial period. The bed especially is a prize: a huge, grim four-poster, with dingy dark maroon drapes on the sides and open at the top.

As I have a passion for reading in bed, Myra has provided a wrought-iron bridge lamp which can be swung so as to illuminate my book. The room is so delightfully gloomy that I can hardly wait until evening to lie there in bed and begin reading *Ghost House,* which I picked up at the store today.

March 7th. As I had intended, I retired about 11 last night to read. I had my bridge lamp on, and the curtains on that side of the bed were drawn back. The interior looked so dark, except where the light shone through the parted curtains, that it seemed almost like entering a tomb. There was a log fire which cast queer, quavering shadows on the ceiling. The ceiling . . . I had not noticed before what sort of paper Myra had picked out for the ceiling. It has a most intriguing design of scroll-work on a dark background. I lay in my gloomy bed and idly traced out the intricate curves in the wavering firelight.

My book is only fair. I read about two chapters and then put it down. My eyes wandered to the ceiling. I shall read some more tonight. There is a faint musty smell in the air. Perhaps the curtains need airing. I shall speak to Myra about it tomorrow.

March 8th. It is wonderful to have a fireplace in one's room. It seems so completely comfortable when the fire is just barely flickering to watch the little flames leaping up from the charred logs. I read some more of *Ghost House.* The book gets better as I progress. From time to time I cast my gaze up at the ceiling. I don't know why, but somehow I enjoy looking at the odd design of scrolls and spirals. A queer pastime, but fascinating. If Myra knew, she would wonder at it. I wonder myself.

March 9th. As soon as I retired last night my gaze rested on the ceiling. For the first time I seemed to feel attracted in some vague uncomfortable way by the queer spirals on the paper. What was it that I read long, long ago about certain cabalistic signs and their power to hypnotize one who looked at them too long? I seemed to remember only the one called the swastika. Surely there were none on my paper. Again I noticed the peculiar odor. Myra declares she airs the room every morning.

Just a word about my dreams. For the past two nights I have dreamed

about my room. In the dream room there is something indefinably terrible. I can not place what it is as yet. I wake up with an uneasy feeling that all is not as it should be in my room. Perhaps I shall have the same dream again. Strange that I have had it now for two consecutive nights!

March 10th, Sunday. Again I have had the same dream. In some odd fashion in my dream I seem to be in my gloomy old four-poster, the curtains tightly closed, looking up at the ceiling which is fitfully illuminated by the dying fire. I know definitely that the disturbing influence, whatever it is, is in the ceiling. This morning when I awoke I was exhausted. Perhaps I do not sleep at all but lie there all night tracing out those maddening curves and spirals by the light of the fire. Terrible thought, that of not knowing whether one is actually dreaming or lying there in that dim shadowy void between true slumber and wakefulness!

I must go to bed early tonight. If my book becomes more exciting I may be able to keep my eyes from those mocking spirals on the ceiling. I hope so.

March 11th. A peculiar thing happened last night. As it was Sunday, I retired early to read. After an unsuccessful attempt to rivet my mind on my book I put it down in disgust. Eagerly (why do I use the word?) my eyes turned to the ceiling. For the first time, instead of tracing out the little scrolls and whorls, I saw the thing as a whole. It is strange and a little uncanny, for the vague blurred outline bears a semblance to some monster. If I look directly I can not see it. If, however, I look out of the corner of one eye, then it takes shape.

I got out of bed to throw a log on the fire. Immediately the whole fantastic design seemed to fade away and became simply the papered ceiling. Seen from the bed again, the faint irregular outline reappeared after a few moments.

Perhaps I should get rid of the four-poster. It is so huge and even sinister with its old red drapes that it may be affecting me as I lie there, night after night, trying to read my book. Certainly there is a smell as of old cloth.

Myra came in last night. "Can't you sleep, Paul?" she asked.

"No, dear; I have been reading and have read myself wide-awake."

Dear girl! She would never understand. She has no imagination. Show her a fragment of cloth from an airplane wing brought down in battle. She would see—simply a piece of cloth, so many inches wide by so long, possibly a bit soiled. She would get no thrill at the thought, nor would she even think of that piece of cloth, miles above the earth, helping to sustain the plane, dodging and dipping around and finally coming down with terrible speed after a well-directed shot.

Ah well! maybe she is better off without an imagination. Perhaps most truly happy people are so because they lack one.

March 12th. This thing is becoming fascinating. As I undressed last night I looked up at the ceiling—ordinary commonplace paper with a design. As soon as I got in bed, though, I looked up and saw the outline of the—shall I say *thing?* It has only a vague shape and I can not say just what it resembles. I tried the experiment of leaning out one side of the bed. Immediately the form disappeared. Can it be because of the poor lighting and the fact that I in my bed lie in comparative darkness, or is it something evil and sinister that is taking place?

I have had no more dreams.

March 13th. Tonight I gave up all pretense of reading. The form in the ceiling fascinates me. Its shape is becoming more and more clearly defined. I am anxious and yet I dread

to see what it will resemble if it continues to grow in clearness.

Myra suspects something. She questioned me several times as to why I look so worn and haggard after what she thinks is a good night's sleep. If she only knew, she would not wonder. But she must never know or she will think I am mad. Perhaps I am. I wonder. . . .

March 14th. My work at the office suffers because of the strange fascination of the ceiling. I can not keep my mind off it for a single moment. At night, as soon as I can leave Myra on a pretext of reading in bed (as though anyone could read inside those old dark drapes!) I slip into my dressing-gown and lie there gazing at the ceiling. It is now more than just interest which draws my attention. It is like an awful attraction which compels us against our very will to look at some terrible accident or catastrophe when we would like to shut our eyes.

The form is growing clearer. It resembles a gigantic bat.

March 15th. I must get rid of my four-poster. It is exerting some evil influence over me, I am sure. Still I have a morbid desire to see this thing through to the finish. Last night the details of the shape in the ceiling became more and more pronounced. I imagined I saw its eyes. In addition, some of the scrolls and spirals seemed actually to writhe. I could not have been asleep. The bridge lamp was on.

I have a feeling that soon the purpose back of all of this will be terribly revealed to me. Somehow I can detach my mind for a time and regard myself in this grim little drama from a distance. I see myself inside my darkened bed behind the red drapes, a look of terrible fascination in my eyes, looking, watching, waiting—for what?

March 16th. I am writing this in bed, and will make notes of all that happens. As soon as I closed the drapes, I looked up at the ceiling. It was already there, a huge, irregular, murky blot on the paper with the writhing scrolls and spirals.

The thing is gaining in clarity and definition. Now as I lie here and look up, its form is quite distinct. I am watching it. I can see its ribbed wings and its little red eyes (can I be sane?) evilly glowing. An odor of things long since consigned to the grave pervades the air—the smell of a charnel-house.

The fire has almost gone out. As the wood ashes smolder and fall to the hearth, the thing in the ceiling seems suddenly to move. Its great bony wings flap slowly and clumsily. It is crawling, crawling, along the ceiling, until it gets directly over my head. It is only a few feet away. Closer, closer, and—oh God! it's going to jump down. . . .

* * * * * * * * *

THE young man was found dead in bed the following morning, an unforgettable look of horror in his wide, staring eyes.

"Death," the coroner reported, "due to heart failure, evidently induced by some violent shock."

But engraven in tiny characters in the ugly carved headboard of the grim old four-poster was found the curious legend:

Let him that sleepeth in this bed
Take heed ere reason leave his head!

The PEARL of a QUEEN

By · · A·A· · IRVINE

"See how a drop of vinegar can dissolve a fortune."

ON A sunny morning toward the end of June a man sat writing at a great mahogany desk in the library of an imposing graystone house in Champleyne Street.

In front of him a spacious bow-window afforded a pleasing vista of the Green Park. The library was a favorite retreat of his, a peaceful spot into which scarcely any sound could penetrate. There was nothing to break the silence, save the chirping of sparrows and a faint murmur of traffic from the streets where London's millions were jamming themselves almost inextricably together in pursuit of pleasure or of business.

Dr. Abbas, to give him the name by which he was known to a goodly section of London's society, was a man of striking appearance. He was in the prime of life, tall, with the broad shoulders and slim waist of an athlete. His dark, slightly curly hair and olive-tinged complexion hinted that he must first have seen the light under sunnier skies than those of Europe. The firmly molded mouth and chin betokened possession of a will indomitable and irresistible. Below the intellectual forehead the steady, steel-gray eyes, a little sunken in their sockets as though from intense study, were kindly, but a little sad in expression. Their glance was singularly penetrating: as a woman had once phrased it, they seemed capable of piercing the inmost secrets of a soul.

The room in which he sat was divided by a massive pair of folding-doors into two portions. That fronting the park had been furnished as the sanctum of a wealthy scholar. Lofty mahogany bookcases, filled with handsomely bound books on every conceivable subject, and in several languages, lined the paneled walls. In the available space left by the bookcases hung a collection of valuable prints. Roomy armchairs and priceless Eastern rugs upon the polished floor completed this portion of the room's equipment.

That half of the apartment which lay beyond the folding-doors was more remarkable. No one entered it, except its owner and his confidential secretary, Mr. Hyrax. It had been fitted up as a laboratory. There, in addition to a complete installation of the latest experimental apparatus known to present-day science, one might have observed appliances which would have puzzled even an up-to-date scientist.

At the far end of the room, its porcelain stove-pipe leading into an adjacent chimney, stood an athanor, that curious furnace of the ancient alchemists, shaped like the miniature model of a castle. Scattered about upon tables were crucibles and long-tubed, bulbous alembics. There were aludels, and pelicans—queer bottle-shaped contrivances for heating substances in the furnace.

The mural decoration was equally noticeable: a set of beautifully colored reproductions of the Mystic Pictures from *Splendor Solis*. Along one side of the chamber ran a bookshelf loaded with ancient vellum-bound tomes bearing strange, uncanny titles; such as *The Golden Tractate of Hermes Trismegistos, The Water-Stone of the Wise, The Chrysopœia of Cleopatra.*

Though there was about Dr. Abbas, clad in his well cut light-gray suit, nothing suggestive of the traditional wizard, there clung around him, nevertheless, an atmosphere of mystery which Society (spelt with a big S) found vastly intriguing. He was, undoubtedly, one of the sensations of a particularly brilliant season. He had arrived in England some two months before, from nowhere in particular, with unexceptionable introductions from personages in high places living abroad. He had purchased Champleyne House, the gloomy mansion of the Duke of Champleyne, at His Grace's own price. Messrs. Catley and Wotherspoon, the well-known house-furnishers and decorators, had been given *carte blanche;* and an army of skilled workmen had descended like a swarm of locusts upon the somber edifice. As at the touch of a magician's wand it had been speedily transformed into a palace. It was said that several of the great gaunt rooms had been sumptuously embellished after the manner of ancient Egypt; it had even been jestingly affirmed that nothing but lack of space had precluded Messrs. Cately and Wotherspoon from completing their scheme of decoration with a pyramid!

Directly the house was ready for him its new owner had entered into occupation, and had at once become a celebrity. He had commenced to entertain lavishly, and his gatherings had been noted for the excellence of his chef and the perfect taste of the arrangements. He had come prominently before the public eye by reason of a princely donation to a children's hospital. For children he appeared to cherish an especial fondness. He delighted in giving parties for them; and to one of the grateful parents he had offered this explanation:

"Youth!—dear lady! How can we do enough for it? Youth!—which we all desire, and lose so soon! Surely, that priceless quality which rejuvenates this gray old world should be held sacred!"

It was only natural that about such a man gossip should have been rife. Old Mr. Atterthwaite, the society tattler, chatting with his crony, the Countess of Orpington, commented:

"A most astounding person! Seems to be richer than Rockefeller! Knows every language under the sun: he was speaking fluent Chinese at the embassy reception the other night! Really, one begins to wonder—one's almost reminded——"

Mr. Atterthwaite's voice trailed away in a mysterious murmur.

The countess broke in exasperatedly: "Bless the man! What's all this havering and hinting? Can't you say what you mean?"

Her companion finished polishing his eye-glass, fixed it firmly in position, and shot at her the question:

"Did you ever hear of the Comte de Saint-Germain?"

"Never, that I'm aware of. Am I likely to have met him somewhere?"

Her companion chuckled. "Hardly!—unless our friend Abbas is his reincarnation! The count died—or rather, disappeared—toward the end of the Eighteenth Century. He was a favored friend of Louis XV and the Pompadour. No—my point is this: History teaches us that every century provides its Dr. Abbas! Let me see" —Mr. Atterthwaite began checking on his fingers—"in the Seventeenth Century we have a Signor Gualdi suddenly turning up in Venice; in the Eighteenth, the Comte de Saint-Germain in Paris; in the Nineteenth, a Major Fraser, also in Paris; in the Twentieth—do you begin to see?"

"I see that you're talking arrant nonsense!"

"Ah, but is it such nonsense? At any rate, there are interesting points of similarity about these different persons. To begin with, they were all great linguists and travelers. Again, each of them appeared to possess unlimited wealth. Each of them was fond of hinting that he had intimately known famous people in bygone times——"

The countess broke in again:

"But, good heavens! You surely aren't suggesting——? Tell me, what is this Dr. Abbas doing here?"

"Oh, well, he makes no secret about that. He travels a great deal, and amuses himself picking up curiosities for his private collection. If he wants a thing, he doesn't mind paying for it. He gave a huge price for that unique copy of *Robinson Crusoe* at Parritch's the other day, if you remember."

"I saw something about it in the newspapers."

Mr. Atterthwaite chuckled again. "Would you believe it, he actually told Parritch that the book had formerly belonged to him, that he had lost it, and that his name had been inscribed by the author upon the fly-leaf!"

"Good gracious! The man must be mad!"

"One would think so. And yet—this is the curious part of it—the name 'Abbas' was certainly there, written in old crabbed characters! I saw it myself!"

Mr. Atterthwaite paused to enjoy his little sensation. Then he resumed:

"As I was saying just now, it is one of the characteristics, this claiming of acquaintanceship with dead and gone celebrities. I'll give you one more instance. At the club the other evening Rudge, the archeologist, was talking about the recent Nebuchadnezzar discoveries on the site of ancient Babylon. Abbas was sitting close to us, apparently half asleep. Well, I distinctly heard him mutter: *'Nebuchadnezzar—ah, yes, he was there after my time.'* Now, what do you make of that?"

"Obviously, the man's crazy!" the countess declared decidedly. She added sententiously: "But you can afford to be crazy, if you're a millionaire!"

SERENELY undisturbed by tittle-tattle, Dr. Abbas sat that morning writing in his library.

He finished the last of his letters, and arranged them in a neat pile on the desk. Then he pressed the knob of an electric bell. Almost immediately there came a knock at the door.

"Come in! Come in, my dear Hyrax!" Abbas called, pleasantly. "I've a piece of news for you this morning!"

The door opened, and there entered a quaint figure. The newcomer was a dwarf, not many inches over four feet in height. Like his master he was dressed in ordinary English costume. In spite of his puny stature, the breadth of his chest and shoulders gave indication of colossal strength. His skin was swarthy, and his gray-flecked hair and smartly trimmed beard were those of a man in the early fifties. His benignant features somewhat resembled those of his namesake, the Syrian coney.

He stood for a moment in the center of the room, his dark eyes fixed affectionately on the man at the desk. Abbas drew a chair closer and motioned him to it.

"Sit down, my dear Hyrax, and listen!" he ordered. "I've good news! Another of our lost treasures will soon be restored to us!"

The dwarf's face lighted with eager interest.

"Another? Which of them, Master?" he queried, excitedly.

"The Queen's Pearl!"

"The Queen's Pearl! You have found it?"

"I know where it is. Its recovery is merely a matter of time."

"And where is it, then?"

"At the present moment it is in the possession of Lady Vanning, the widow of the war profiteer. It forms the pendant to her new necklace."

"How did you discover this?"

"Through her daughter." Abbas reached for a box of cigarettes, lit one, and pushed the box toward his companion. He leaned back in his chair and continued: "Miss Charmion Vanning is, of course, quite unaware that she was my informant."

Hyrax raised his eyebrows. "Charmion!" he murmured. "That is strange!"

"Yes, is it not? Strange that she should bear today the name she bore those centuries ago, when first she coveted the Queen's Pearl! It was her name that first attracted my attention. And then, I read her mind —and knew!"

"Master! It is wonderful! When I recall how we have searched the cities of the world——!"

Abbas, smiling at the little man's enthusiasm, finished his sentence for him.

"It is wonderful to find our quest ended in London? You are right! But is it not still more wonderful to reflect how, throughout the years, her spirit has hovered near the object of its desire? — And now she will be the instrument to restore the Queen's Pearl to its rightful owner."

"How will you manage that?"

"There will be no difficulty. She will lunch here today to inspect my jewels, and I shall give her her instructions. Her mind will be open to influence. She is jewel-mad, like her predecessor. One meets them sometimes—women who will sell themselves for diamonds! Think of it, Hyrax! For diamonds—those nodules of pure crystallized carbon which you and I make when we require them!" Abbas waved a hand in the direction of the laboratory.

"Will you need my help?" his companion asked, after a pause.

"Most certainly! We must have a replica. We are not robbers, my friend, and Lady Vanning must have in exchange a pearl of equal intrinsic value. It will be for you to find me one."

The dwarf considered for a moment.

"Vartier, the Paris jeweler, has two such pearls," he said, at length.

"Paragon pearls of a similar size and purity. He hopes to sell them to an Eastern potentate. He values each of them at seventy-five thousand pounds."

"No more than that? The price has not altered greatly! Four hundred Greek talents was the price the queen paid, if I recollect rightly. Well, see to it, then, my good Hyrax—and remember, there must be no stinting of money."

The dwarf nodded. Then he said: "There is one small difficulty. The setting — the design of the golden clasp?"

"That need not trouble you. Miss Vanning will make for us an exact drawing of her mother's pendant."

Hyrax grinned. "In the magnetic sleep?"

"Of course! The method of our old friend, Friedrich Mesmer."

"I see. And when will the replica be required?"

"On this day week. The night of my Egyptian *Soirée*. Lady Vanning and her daughter will be among the company. I shall stage a little diversion for my guests' amusement, and at the end of it the Queen's Pearl will be once more in our keeping."

Hyrax chuckled. "A brief exhibition of collective hypnotism, I suppose?"

"Precisely! Is it not strange how little is known about that subject? Certain savants have, of course, admitted that it is often easier to hypnotize a crowd than an individual. It is the true explanation of the Indian rope trick. To a certain extent all great orators have the power. One has only to consider the enormous sale of patent medicines to comprehend the readiness of the human mind to receive suggestions!"

As Abbas finished speaking, the dwarf leaned forward, intently studying his master's face. He glanced at the buhl clock on the mantelpiece, and rose briskly from his chair.

"It is time for the drops!" he announced.

Abbas looked at his watch. "Already? — But yes, I feel the change approaching." He sighed. "The effects of the elixir last less long than they were wont to do: the years are taking their toll!"

WHILST his companion hurried into the laboratory, a startling change came over the figure seated at the desk. It was as though old age were suddenly descending upon it. The broad shoulders began to droop forward. The clothing began to sag around the shrinking body. There were lines forming round the slackening muscles of the firmly cut jaws. An expression of age-long weariness crept into the steel-gray eyes.

But at that moment the dwarf reappeared through the doorway. In one hand he held a tiny crystal phial filled with bright ruby-colored liquid, in the other a tube of shining metal—the "golden conduit" of the ancient philosophers. With the deftness of long practise he inserted the tube between his master's lips and poured through it the contents of the phial.

The effect was magical. Whilst he stood watching, life flowed back into the shrunken frame. The lines were smoothed away. His master sat before him rejuvenated.

Abbas took from him the phial, and allowed a shaft of sunlight to play on the few remaining drops of wine-red liquor sparkling at the bottom.

"My marvelous elixir!" he cried, exultantly. "Giver of youth! Renewer of life! Powerless, indeed, to arrest forever death which must inevitably overcome us all; but mighty enough to postpone death's onset, to prolong our period for knowledge! How many illustrious men have sought for thee? Hermes, the first Master; Avicenna; Roger Bacon—the names are legion! Men who have grown old seeking to find that 'per-

fect gold', the Philosopher's Stone, which is the basis of thy being!"

He abruptly ceased his rhapsody, and looked apologetically at his companion.

"Forgive me, my friend!" he said. "While the spell is on me, I forget that we live now in prosaic times!"

"The elixir deserves all that you have said of it," Hyrax asserted, warmly.

"True! And yet, you would not fully avail yourself of its powers? It was by your own wish that its action was suspended so as to leave you to outward appearances fifty-five!"

Hyrax made a slight gesture of annoyance.

"Fifty-three!" he corrected. "Yes, it was my wish. I was never young; and, with my face and form, a few gray hairs command respect."

"Ah, I understand. And, after all, what does it matter? We have, I trust, a long span yet during which to go down the centuries together—we who age less in a year than the average man in an hour! What are these ordinary human beings to us? No more than *homunculi*—those minute creatures whom dear old Paracelsus hoped to create artificially! You remember?"

"He explained his theory the night we supped with him at his house in Basle."

"So he did! After our return from Damascus. That was a good many years ago?"

Hyrax reflected for a few seconds.

"Exactly four hundred and seven years on the thirty-first of March next," he replied, gravely.

Abbas laughed. "You were always meticulously precise about your dates! Was it as recently as that? I recollect that after supper we had some slight discussion——"

Hyrax interjected dryly: "Your discussion lasted uninterruptedly for two whole nights and a day!" He stifled a yawn at the recollection.

Abbas laughed again. "Quite possibly! In those days dialectics, like travel, were less hurried. But I was always argumentative: even as a schoolboy at Memphis, when Rameses the Second was king. How I used to hate his supercilious face and his ridiculously long neck!—But it is nearly lunch time; our guest will be arriving."

WHEN Miss Vanning reached the house ten minutes later, she was agreeably surprized to learn that she was to have a *tête-à-tête* meal with her host.

She was a brunette of twenty-four, dressed, coiffured and painted after the fashion affected by the young folk of the ultra-smart set to which she belonged. On her handsome, discontented face had been set the seal of the Great God Jazz.

To her host's secret amusement, it quickly became evident that Charmion Vanning was laying herself out to fascinate him. As a matter of fact, she frankly admitted to herself that he had interested her from the time when she had first met him. He was handsome, mysterious and, so far as she could judge, the possessor of illimitable wealth. He was apparently unmarried; and though, as she knew, there were dozens of women ready to come at his call, he never appeared to trouble himself about them. She flattered herself that, of late, he had been anxious to seek her company. And while she realized that he was, as yet, not in love with her, she had begun to wonder. . . .

During a luxurious repast, of which her host ate sparingly, she thought her mystery man more than ever attractive. He entertained her with stories of his travels, and described a Sixteenth Century *château* in France which he was thinking of buying. If he did, he said, she and her mother must some day pay him a visit.

"And now I must show you my little collection of jewels," he wound

up, as he rose and opened the door for her. "I keep them in a special room designed to display their beauty to the best advantage."

He led the way up a flight of softly carpeted stairs, and ushered her into a small room with windows facing the park.

Charmion Vanning stared about her in astonishment. Never had she seen such a place. The floor and ceiling were of sun-colored Italian marble, and the walls of dark green marble from Africa. At the end farthest from the windows was a pool of snow-white alabaster, in which Japanese goldfish were swimming lazily in the water plashing from a fountain of wrought silver. Round the room were glass-topped cabinets of polished cedarwood, in which she could see sparkling and coruscating the facet-glint of precious stones set in bracelets, collars and rings of innumerable designs, modern and antique.

Her host smiled at her gasp of wonder, and crossed over to a window, where a huge bronze bowl of exquisite roses stood on a carved ivory table. He put a few of them together into a bunch, and offered it to her.

"What lovely flowers!" she exclaimed. "But surely, they are not English?"

"No. They arrived yesterday by air-post from my villa garden near Damascus."

Charmion Vanning laughed, a little nervously. "You amazing person! There's this—this palace; you've been talking of a French *château;* and now there's a villa at Damascus! How many houses have you?"

"Really, I haven't counted them lately," Abbas replied, uninterestedly. "I find it convenient to have some sort of *pied-à-terre* in several of the principal cities. But, allow me!—those flowers of yours should have a sweeter perfume."

He drew from his pocket a phial, and sprinkled a few drops of liquid on the bunch of roses she was holding. Instantly, their fragrance increased, and two of the buds unclosed.

"This tincture will also impart an added luster to metals," he remarked. "Watch!"

He let fall a drop or two on the bronze bowl, which commenced to shine with the bright red glow of a fire.

In spite of her habitual *sang-froid* Charmion Vanning felt her senses reeling.

"Are you—are you a magician?" she stammered, breathlessly.

Her host's cheery answer reassured her.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "I dabble a little in chemistry, that is all! The tincture was discovered by a staid old alchemist several hundred years ago. He named it 'The Red Lion'. — Do you mind if I draw the curtains? I always think that precious stones look their best by artificial light."

She nodded consent, and he drew a pair of heavy black velvet curtains across the windows. He pressed a switch, and the room became flooded with radiance from an inverted bowl of carnelian-onyx suspended from the ceiling.

She caught her breath sharply, as the light was flashed back in scintillating, many-colored flame from the ornaments clustered in the cabinets.

He began to tell her their histories. That great emerald set in a plaque of solid gold had been the turban-jewel of an ancient Emperor of the East. That fire-opal ring had been taken from the finger of a dead Aztec chief by one of the *conquistadores* in Mexico. Charmion Vanning listened to him spellbound. She had quite recovered her self-possession. Her lips were parted, her cheeks were flushed with excitement as she held a glittering diamond pendant against the soft white material of her frock, or clasped a sapphire-studded bracelet round a slim wrist.

Now and again, a look of pity mixed with disdain passed over Abbas' face as he watched her. How many other women had he seen, throughout the ages, ready to sell themselves for baubles such as these!

He left her examining them, and unlocked a small steel safe let into the wall. From it he took a casket of gold filigree-work, and brought it back to where she was standing. He opened the lid, and again a cry of wonder burst from her.

In the casket were compartments filled with cut and uncut gems of every variety. In one compartment there was nothing but pearls.

She bent over them, gloating. "Oh, the pearls!" she cried. "May I touch them?"

Without waiting for an answer she plunged her fingers into the casket, drew out a handful, and let them pour slowly back in a silvery stream, sensing voluptuously their satinlike texture as they tinkled into their sanctuary.

"The pearls!" she cried again, an almost hysterical note in her voice. "There is nothing like them! I could sell my soul for pearls!"

Abbas spoke, harshly sardonic. "A rash offer! And your soul would not be worth much at such a price!"

She did not seem to be listening. "Often when I dream, it is of pearls!" she went on. "There is something—something that I can't explain——"

Abbas was regarding her intently. He took a step nearer, and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Shall I explain to you? It is of one great pearl that you dream! And now you shall dream of it—for me!" His tone changed sharply to one of imperious command. "Look at me!"

She glanced up at him, startled and mutinous. His steel-gray eyes were fixed on her. Their pupils had narrowed to points: it was as though a light were shining behind them. A feeling of intense drowsiness stole over her. Under that unwavering, compelling gaze her own eyes closed.

Abbas took her gently by the hand, and led her unresisting to a couch near the window.

"Sleep!" he ordered. "Sleep until I bid you wake—but answer my questions! Do you hear me?"

The reply appeared to come from a far distance.

"Master—I hear."

"Then, listen! You will dream of the Queen's Pearl. The great pearl which the queen gave to me in days gone by. Can you see it?"

"I can see it—Master."

"Where is it now?"

"In a house. In our house in Bevern Square. It forms the pendant of a necklace."

"To whom does it rightfully belong?"

There came no answer. Abbas' face grew stern.

"So you will not tell me?—because your spirit has never ceased from coveting it? Dare you oppose your will to mine? I command you to tell me—whose is that pearl?"

The answer came, dragged from reluctant lips.

"The queen—gave it—to you."

"You speak truly! The queen gave it to me. It is mine! Will you help me to recover that which is my own?"

"I will do—what you command."

"That is well! And now, make for me an exact drawing of the golden clasp in which the pearl is set. Be careful!"

He placed a sheet of paper and a pencil beside the sleeping girl, and waited patiently while she traced the design. When she had finished, he tucked the paper into his pocketbook and waved a hand lightly across her face.

"Wake, now!" he ordered. "Remember nothing of what has passed; but when the time is come—obey!"

A few seconds later Charmion Vanning found herself seated on the couch close to the open window. The

curtains had been drawn aside, and the room was lighted by the rays of the afternoon sun. Her host was bending over her with a look of concern.

"You were feeling faint, I'm afraid?" he asked, solicitously. "The heat of the room, perhaps; or the scent of the flowers?"

She passed a hand over her forehead, bewildered; then forced a laugh.

"How silly of me! I'm not given to fainting! It must have been the heat. I've been racketing a good deal, lately——"

Abbas shook his head reprovingly. "Ah, these late nights! Still, I can't help feeling a little guilty!"

He took from his pocket a necklet of sapphires in an antique setting which she had been admiring, and continued:

"Will you do me the honor of accepting this as a memento of your visit?"

Her eyes sparkled. "For me? How lovely of you! Do you really mean it?"

Abbas inclined his head courteously. "Certainly, if you will permit me. But I must first have the clasp seen to. That's how these things get lost. A defective clasp, the least little jerk, and they drop off and are gone!"

THERE was an air of expectancy about the guests assembled at Champleyne House on the night of Dr. Abbas' *Soirée* which argued well for the success of the entertainment.

The invitation cards had borne the legend: "A Night in Ancient Egypt"—and, in accordance with their host's desire, most of those present were in Eastern costumes. The ladies especially had let themselves go in the matter of exotic adornment, and the brilliantly lighted salons blazed with a dazzle of jewelry.

Word had gone round that in addition to the amusements customary at such functions, the guests would witness something entirely novel. Some people had even gone so far as to hint darkly at an exhibition of magic; and on that subject the Countess of Orpington had spoken in no uncertain manner to her escort, Mr. Atterthwaite, who was looking portly and rubicund in the robes of a priest of Ra.

"If this Abbas man turns himself into the Devil, or anything of that kind," she had given warning, "I shall send for my car and go straight home!"

However, it was not until after supper that their host afforded his guests any knowledge of what was in store for them. Then, a tall, imposing figure in the uniform of a captain of the Ptolemaic body-guard, he addressed the company.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "by means of a method of my own I propose to show you some old-time scenes of the land of my birth. Scenes from the life-story of Antony and Cleopatra."

"That sounds interesting!" drawled a pretty woman with the vacuous features of a doll. "Didn't somebody write a play about them? Shakespeare? Or was it Shaw?"

Abbas laughed. "I promise you that my presentation will be entirely original! May I ask you all to follow me into the room I call my Egyptian court?"

He conducted them to a spacious hall, in which were divans and piles of silken cushions. Along each side of it were carved pillars of cypress-wood, in shape resembling those of the ruined temple of Karnak. One end of it was screened from view by curtains. The only illumination was a pale phosphorescent light round the tops of the pillars.

As the guests, amused and chattering, seated themselves, there drifted through the curtains an aromatic perfume, drowsy and enervating. As though from afar came faint strains

of barbaric music, a haunting melody of half-tones.

In a clear, solemn voice their host began to speak.

"The hymn to Ra, the Sun God. His emblem was a disk; and gazing upon it his worshipers were wont to pass from the world in which they lived into another. Come, let me show you."

He swept aside the curtains. In the dim light his audience could see an arched recess. In the middle of it smoldered a great four-legged censer; and above the censer, poised in midair, revolved a disk of metal shining with a dull red glow spinning round an invisible axis. And, while they watched, its speed increased: faster and faster it whirled, until there was no longer any sign of motion, its red glow changing from the glare of a fire to the dazzling incandescence of the electric arc. The aroma of incense became stronger.

The minutes passed. From where he stood facing them Abbas looked down upon his guests. Their chatter had died away. There was deep silence. Not one of them moved. From that room filled with people there came no sound, save the sound of their breathing. Like automata they sat, straining forward, their gaze riveted on that white-hot point of luminosity. Except that their eyes were wide open, one would have said that they were sleeping.

He turned, and raised his arms above his head. Instantly, dense wreaths of white smoke began to curl upward from the censer and roll billowing forward into the space between the curtains. Then, as if flung upon a vast ivory screen, there grew there, vivid and distinct, the pictures of an age gone by. . . .

NIGHT had fallen. From the full moon riding high in the dark blue vault there poured a flood of radiance silvering the waters of a river where they widened into the still surface of a lake. Away to the left the myriad lights of the great city of Tarsus twinkled against the velvet-shadowed slopes of the hills.

Anchored upon the shimmering bosom of the lake lay the state-galley of the queen. Only that morning her crew of toiling oarsmen, laboring under the whips of their task-masters at the triple banks of silver-mounted sweeps, had brought her to her moorage. But now the sails of Tyrian purple, with their cordage and tassels of silver, drooped idly, scarcely stirred by the soft, warm breeze from the north.

It was a vessel fit for a queen! Cunning artificers, working with rare woods and metals and precious stones, had contrived upon it pavilions and saloons, colonnaded courts and shrines. Below the main deck was the banqueting-hall of cedar covered thickly with gold-leaf, carpeted with fresh roses into which, a few hours since, the feet of the banqueters had sunk ankle-deep as they passed to their cushioned lounges.

Above the stern there towered a shelter fashioned from plates of burnished gold. It was shaped like the head of a gigantic elephant, its trunk upraised in the air. The flickering blaze of the torches fixed in their silver sconces to the bulwarks, flashed from its plates in shafts of lambent flame.

In front of it, on a massive ebony pedestal, a golden thurible filled the still air with the languorous scent of kyphi balls—that famed Egyptian incense compounded by myrrh and juniper berries, mastic and honey and grapes — their perfumes mingling with the fragrance of the cedarwood and roses, the powdered cinnamon in the women's hair.

From the fore-part of the vessel came the sound of music, of flutes and tambourines, the ripple of seven-stringed harps, timed by the rhythmic tapping of the drums and the jingling of holy systra, their metal rods rat-

tling in their horse-shoe frames. The song was a chant to Nephthys, sister of Isis, goddess of the dusk.

Round the great shelter were grouped the queen's attendants: officers of the Guard, gigantic Nubian slaves, women with forms such as Praxiteles might have chosen for his art. The dark-browed beauty wielding an enormous fan of ostrich-feathers, her downcast eyes fixed hungrily on the queen's jewels, might have been Charmion Vanning. Boys dressed as cupids flitted among the guests bearing goblets brimming with mellow wine — Falernian and the rare Phenician vintage of Gebal Byblos.

On a gem-incrusted couch, against pillows of cloth of gold, her rounded limbs gleaming through robes of diaphanous silk, reclined the queen—Cleopatra, august daughter of the Ptolemies, ruler of Egypt. Venus incarnate from her dainty, dark-haired head to her tiny, jewel-sandaled feet. Seductive, fearless, radiant in the pride of her all-conquering loveliness.

Her eyes, dark fathomless pools, regarded quizzically the man seated by her side—a man clad in rich garments with the muscles of a gladiator, a broad forehead and firm mouth, but with something of the appearance of an over-grown child.

Above the sound of the chant her voice rang clear as the tone of a bell.

"Thou speakest of love, mighty Antony; and truly, it is what most mortals crave for! But I tell thee, there is yet another gift of the Gods which is more to be desired than love!"

He glanced around him at that scene of splendid, wanton luxury, and asked:

"Is it wealth, oh Egypt?"

A scornful smile curved the exquisite lips. "Wealth!" she cried. "Dost thou indeed believe that wealth is lasting?" A freakish look passed over her countenance. "Come, let me give thee proof!"

She clapped her hands, and a moment later an attendant knelt before her proffering a golden chalice.

With a twist of delicate fingers she unfastened one of her earrings, a pearl the size of a small walnut, and let it fall into the cup. With cynical eyes she watched the pearl dissolve.

"See how a drop of vinegar can devour a fortune!" she exulted. Slowly she circled the cup, then raised it to her lips.

"To thy health—and thy deeper understanding, oh Antony!" she mocked, and quaffed the potion.

Her voice sank to a whisper. "Nay, that which is more enduring than love or riches is—power!"

THERE was a pause while Abbas again surveyed that silent company. His gaze sought for and held the glassy stare of Charmion Vanning where she sat beside her mother. The lines of his face set grim in an intense concentration of will. He saw her start and quiver, as though at a shock from an electric battery. Then, slowly, one of her hands began to move.

Once more he raised his arms, and the scene changed. . . .

In a grove of cypresses and sycamores there stood a miniature pavilion, its alabaster dome supported on pillars of porphyry. In front was a terrace with a marble balustrade; and far below, beyond the wooded slopes of the mountain, stretched the lake on which the galley still rode lazily at anchor.

It was the hour before sunrise. Already on the horizon gray skies were breaking into rosy light. There was scarcely a sound: only the distant croaking of frogs by the margin of the lake, the chirping of newly awakened birds, the call of a sentry answering the challenge of the guard.

The door of the pavilion opened, and the queen came forth clad in a Grecian robe of pure white silk spangled with gold. She walked toward the balustrade, and leaned there watching the dawn.

She turned, as a tall figure in the uniform of a captain of the Guard strode through the bushes, crossed the terrace and knelt on one knee before her.

"Lo, I have come as I was bidden," he said, in a voice broken by emotion. "But must it be farewell, oh my Queen?"

She bowed her head in assent.

"It is, in truth, farewell, Abbas, my lover! Destiny lies with the Gods; and Egypt hath more need of powerful friends than her sovereign of lovers!—Yet, memory is sweet! I leave thee this for a token."

From a fold in her robe she drew a great pearl earring, and laid it in his palm.

Then, as he sprang erect, she waved him imperiously back.

"Nay, follow me not!" she commanded. Her voice grew swiftly tender: "Lest at this hour I prove myself more of a woman than a queen! Farewell!"

She passed into the shade of the cypresses—and was gone.

WITH the confused babel of a theater audience transported back to reality by the fall of the curtain on an absorbing play, Dr. Abbas' guests awoke from their trance. And this was strange!—not one of them seemed to realize that he had been through an unusual experience.

The vast hall was ablaze with light, and somewhere in the house a band was playing the latest dance music. One heard the customary comments: "Wasn't it interesting?"—"How do you suppose it was done?"

All at once, above the chatter rose the hysterical cry of a woman:

"My pearls! My pearls! Someone has taken my necklace!"

There was a hush of consternation. Everyone looked to where Lady Vanning was standing beside her daughter.

"My necklace is gone!" she repeated. "I was so engrossed in watching —but I recollect now that in the darkness I felt as if someone's fingers——"

She spoke sharply to her daughter: "Charmion, did you notice anyone touch me?"

Before her daughter could reply she heard her host speaking behind her.

"Fortunately, it has not gone very far, Lady Vanning," he said, as he stooped behind her chair, then rose and handed her the necklace with a smile. "I'm afraid the clasp must be defective. You should speak severely to your jewelers!"

AFTER his guests had departed, Dr. Abbas sat for a long while alone in his library. Before him on the table lay the great pearl.

He could see again in fancy the galley moored on the lake, the terraced garden before the dawn.

"Shakespeare knew how to word it!" he murmured:

"The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
Burnt on the water; the poop was beaten gold,
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were love-sick——"

He sighed deeply. "Ah, my Queen! For thy country's sake thou chosest power rather than love! Didst thou choose wisely?"

The Laughing Thing

by G. G. Pendarves

"So we found Tony! His eyes—awful contrast to his grinning mouth—mirrored a terror too profound for any words to convey."

"VERY well, Mr. Drewe! I'll sign the agreement, though no one but you would drive such a devil's bargain."

The speaker's tall, emaciated body vibrated with indignation, and his strange light eyes blazed like incandescent lamps. There was something of the brooding menace of the gray sea in the latter, and a note in his voice reminded me of the sullen mutter of the wind before a storm.

A little shiver of apprehension ran through me as I turned from him to my brother-in-law, Jason Drewe. Nothing could have been more utterly and infuriatingly complacent than the latter, who was leaning back in the most comfortable chair my office afforded, with an expensive cigar in his mouth, his big frame clad in the smartest of light tweeds, and an orchid in his buttonhole.

Jason was an extremely wealthy man, young enough to enjoy his money, and with a son to inherit his millions one day. The loss of Mavis, his wife, had been more of an annoyance than a grief to him; he felt that she had died merely to make things awkward for him—in fact, he added her death to the many grievances he treasured up against her.

I knew that if there is such a thing as a broken heart, he broke my sister's, and I hated him for it. I would have cut off all intercourse with him, only that I had promised Mavis to keep an eye on the boy, and

counteract his father's influence as far as possible. Jason knew nothing of this; he believed I hung on to him for the sake of his wealth and twitted me with it quite openly, in spite of the fact that I was never indebted to him for a single dime, and would have cleaned the streets, or sold "hot dogs" rather than owe him a penny.

It seemed absurd to pity him, especially at this moment of his triumph, when he had succeeded in getting the land he wanted at the price he wanted, and was sitting there before me as pink and pleased as a prize baby after its bottle.

Eldred Werne, whom Jason had just cornered so successfully, was the one whom most people would have pitied. But I had only admiration for anyone as determined and strong of soul as Werne. Poor and desperately ill though he was, he was not an object for pity.

As junior partner in the firm of Baxter and Baxter, real estate agents, I was present to witness the signatures and conclude the deal between Werne and Jason; and I wished a thousand times that Baxter and Baxter had never had this affair entrusted to them. It was a sordid, despicable business altogether.

"I'll sign," repeated Werne, drawing his chair closer to my desk, and taking up the parchments in his thin, blue-veined hands. "The land shall be yours at your own price—for the present!"

Anger and instant suspicion showed in Jason's small, heavy-lidded eyes.

"What the devil do you mean?" he said. "If you sign these papers the land is mine, and there's no power on earth can make me pay more for it than the sum set down there in black and white."

"I wasn't thinking of money." Werne's voice was strangely quiet and yet so full of menace that again I felt every nerve in my body thrill to it. "I am sure you will never pay more in money."

"You're right — dead right, Werne," Jason's resonant voice echoed through the room.

"And yet—I think you will pay more in the end. Yes, in the end you will pay more, Mr. Drewe."

Jason turned to me blustering and furious.

"Aren't these deeds water-tight? What does he mean? If there is any flaw in these agreements I'll stamp you and your fool firm out of existence!"

Before I could reply, Werne began to laugh. He sat there and laughed long and dreadfully, the bright color staining his thin cheeks, his gray eyes brilliant and malicious. He laughed until the cough seized him, and he leant back at last utterly exhausted, an ominous stain on the handkerchief he pressed to his lips.

"Let me relieve your natural anxiety, Mr. Drewe," he said at last, his hoarse voice still shaken with mirth. "You will pay more, but not in money! Not in any material sense at all."

"What in the name of common sense do you mean?" growled Jason.

"There is nothing common at all in the sense of which I speak. It is very uncommon indeed! I refer to payments which have no connection with money—nothing which can be reckoned in dollars and cents."

Jason looked uncertain whether to call police protection or medical aid, and he watched Werne narrowly as the latter signed the documents.

When the signatures were completed, Eldred Werne got to his feet and stood looking down at Jason—a long, strange, deep look, as if he meant to learn the other's every feature off by heart. Behind Werne's eyes once more a sudden terrifying flame of laughter danced—flickered—and was gone!

"You don't fear any payment that

will not reduce your bank account, then?"

"What other payment is there?" asked Jason in genuine surprize.

"You're wonderful!" said Werne. "So complete a product of your age and kind. So logical and limited and — excuse me — so thoroughly stupid!"

Jason's fresh-colored face turned a deep purple.

"If you were not a sick man——" he began.

"And one, moreover, whom you have thoroughly and satisfactorily fleeced," interpolated Werne.

"I should resent your remarks," continued Jason pompously. "As it is, I see no use in prolonging this conversation."

"Stay!" cried Werne, as Jason put on his fur coat and prepared to depart. "It's only fair to warn you that if I die out there in Denver City, I shall come back again! I shall be in a better position then, without this wretched body of mine. I shall come back—to make you pay —a more satisfactory price for my Tareytown acres."

Jason stared, standing in the doorway with one plump well-manicured hand on the door-knob, looking like a great shaggy ox in his fur coat, and with that air of stupid bewilderment on his broad face.

"Wha-a-a-at?" he stammered. Then, as the other's meaning slowly dawned on him, he leaned up against the door and showed every tooth in his head in a perfect bellow of mirth. "Are you threatening to haunt me?" he choked, the veins on his forehead swelling dangerously. "Well, my good fellow, if it gives you any comfort to imagine that, don't let me discourage your little idea. You'll be welcome at Tareytown any old time! The Tareytown specter, eh? It'll give quite an air to the place! What kind of payment will you want—moonshine, eh?" Jason almost burst with the humor of this remark. "Moonshine and ghosts! Seems the right sort of mixture!"

With a last fatuous chuckle, Jason opened the door; and, through the window, I saw him get into his new coupé and drive off, his face still creased in enjoyment of his last sally.

"The descent of man," murmured Werne, half to himself. "There's no doubt that Jason Drewe has descended a considerable way from the apes! The fool—the blind, besotted fool!"

2

It was a perfect day in the late autumn of that same year, when, for the first time, I saw the Tareytown estate.

I dismissed my taxi at the huge stone gateway, and walked slowly up through the woods. After the hectic rush and noise of New York, the golden stillness around me was deeply satisfying; and I thought of poor Eldred Werne, who would never know the beauty and healing peace of this place again. I had seen the notice of his death in Denver City, only a month after he had signed away his rights to these lovely Tareytown woods, and I had thought very often since of the lonely bitterness which must have clouded his last days.

Glimpses of the blue, shining Hudson shone between the trees, and beyond, the flaming russet of the Palisades. On all sides the country stretched out to dim, misty horizons for which Werne's dying eyes must have longed in his exile.

Then, quite suddenly, a chill passed over me. I became aware of the ominous and unusual stillness of the brooding woods. Neither bird nor squirrel darted to and fro among the leaves and branches—not even a fly buzzed about in the hazy sunshine.

I looked around in gathering apprehension. What *was* it that began to oppress me more and more? Why

did the tall trees seem to be listening?—why did I have the impulse to look over my shoulder?—why did my heart thump and my hands chill suddenly?

With a great effort I restrained myself from breaking into a run, as I continued upward toward the house. The path doubled back on itself across and across the shoulder of the hill on which the house, Red Gables, was built; and it was fully ten minutes before I arrived breathless in sight of its red roof and high old-fashioned chimney-stack.

In a corner of its wide porch, I caught a glimpse of a boy's figure and let out a loud halloo, glad of an excuse to break the queer, unnatural silence.

There was an answering hail, and my nephew, Tony, came running down the path to meet me.

"Hello, Uncle John! I was waiting for you! Did you walk up through the woods—alone?" The boy's voice held an awed note, which was emphasized by the look of fear in his dark eyes.

He was only eight years old, and exactly like his mother. Thank heaven, there was no trace of Jason's complacent materialism in his son . . . mind and body, Tony was an utterly different type. I loved the boy, and a real friendship had developed between us, despite the disparity of our years. He was curiously sensitive and mature for his age, and it was a great thing for a bachelor like myself to have a child make a little tin god of me, as Tony did.

"And why not walk alone through the woods?" I demanded, looking down at him as he rubbed his head against my arm like some friendly colt.

"I wouldn't," he replied simply.

"Why not, old man? There aren't any wolves or bears or even Indians left here, are there?"

"Don't laugh, Uncle." The boy's voice sank to a whisper. "There isn't time to tell you now, but there's something in those woods. Something you can't see—that—that is waiting!"

I stared at the boy, and once again the cold chill I had experienced during my walk up to the house crept over me.

"Look here, Tony," I began. "You mustn't get——"

"There is—there *is*, I tell you!" He was passionately in earnest. "Something that laughs—something that is waiting!"

"Laughs — waiting!" I echoed feebly.

"You'll hear it yourself," he answered. "Then you'll know. Father won't let me speak about it to him, and says if I'd play games instead of reading books, I'd only hear and see half what I do now."

"About as much as he hears and sees," I murmured to myself.

"I am sure Father hears it too, only he won't say so," continued Tony. "But I've noticed one thing—he won't let anyone knock at the doors. The servants even go into his study without knocking, and he was always so—so——"

"Exactly!" I said dryly; "I understand."

The small hand in mine gave a little warning pressure, and I saw Jason Drewe's big frame and massive head loom up in the comparative dimness of the interior, as Tony and I reached the entrance door of Red Gables.

"Well, John!" boomed my host, as he rose from the depths of a vast chair and came forward, cigar in hand. "Made your fortune yet?"

It was the form of greeting he invariably gave me; for he was that irritating type of man who uses a limited number of favorite witticisms and sticks to them persistently, in season and out of season.

Today, however, his complacent heartiness was obviously an immense

effort to him, and I was quite startled by the change in his appearance. He seemed conscious of it himself, but there was a certain bravado in the sunken eyes he turned on me, which defied me to remark on his ill looks.

I was certainly shocked to notice how much thinner he was, how gray his skin, and how hunted and restless were his eyes, as he kept glancing from side to side with a quick upward jerk of his big head, as though he were listening for some expected and unwelcome summons.

He motioned me to a chair and poured out drinks with a fumbling sort of touch, which further indicated the change in him since I last saw him in the office of Baxter and Baxter.

Tony curled up at my side on the arm of my easy-chair, as quiet as a doormouse, taking no part in the conversation, but his precocious intelligence enabled him to follow the drift of it; that I could swear to. He annoyed his father, this silent observant child, and in the middle of a discussion Jason turned irritably to the boy.

"Why don't you go off and amuse yourself out of doors like any other boy of your age? You sit round the house like a little lap-dog and waste your time with books—always mooning about like someone in a dream! Just like your mother—just like her," he finished in an exasperated mutter.

When we were alone, Jason turned to me with a frown. "More like a girl than a boy!" he commented bitterly. "About as much pep as a soft drink! What's the use of building up a business and making a future for him, when he'll let it all slip through his fingers later on?"

He went on talking rather loudly and quickly on the subject, with no help at all from me, and it struck me he was talking in order to defeat his own clamorous unpleasant thoughts; working himself up into a pretense of anger to make the blood run more hot and swift in his veins.

As far as he was able, within the limited scope of his primitive nature, Jason loved the boy, and every hope and ambition he cherished was centered round Tony, and Tony's future. I just let him run on, and speculated with increasing bewilderment on the cause of my brother-in-law's obvious uneasiness of soul. It must be something tremendous to have shaken his colossal egotism, I argued to myself, and moreover it was something he was desperately anxious to hide—some unacknowledged fear which had pricked and wounded him deep beneath his tough skin.

"I'm not satisfied with that school of his—not at all satisfied!" he went on. "I ask you now, what's the use of filling a kid's head with all that imaginary stuff when he's got to live in a world of Jews and politicians and grafters? How's he going to grind his own when his darned school has exchanged it for a silver butter knife? How's he going to——"

He broke off with a queer strangled groan as a sudden clamorous knocking sounded—a loud tattoo like the sound of war-drums through the quiet house.

The big sunshiny room darkened suddenly and a puff of wind from an open window at my side breathed an icy chill on my cheek. The horror I had recently experienced in the woods swept over me again, and I saw Jason's face set in a mask of fear and loathing.

Silence held us bound for a perceptible moment, and in the quiet a loud, echoing laugh rang out.

It sounded as though someone were standing just outside the house, and I had a vivid mental image of a figure convulsed and rocking with mirth. But this figure of my imagination did not move me to laughter

myself, although as a rule nothing is more contagious than laughter—but not this—not this hateful mirth!

I dashed to the window and looked out; then, making for the door in blind haste, I stumbled out on the porch and ran round the house in a queer frenzy of desire to learn who—or *what*—had stood there laughing . . . laughing . . . laughing.

I only caught a glimpse of frightened faces in the servants' quarters at the back of the house as I dashed past, and saw windows and doors being hastily slammed.

When I got back to the living-room again Jason was gone, and I sat down breathless, and shaken to the very soul. I had stumbled on to the secret—or part of it—with a vengeance; and I sat with my unlit pipe in my mouth for the better part of an hour, until the first overwhelming horror of the episode had faded a little.

Jason came in just as I was thinking of going up to my room to change for dinner, and any idea I might have entertained of asking him for explanations was foiled by the extraordinary change in him.

He was his old self again. Large, pink, and prosperous, he breezed into the room and stood with his hands in his pockets, grinning down at me from his massive six feet odd. If there was something defiant in the gleam of his blue eye, if his voice was harsh and his grin a trifle too wide, it needed someone who knew him as well as I did to detect it.

I never liked or admired him as much as I did at that moment; and the determination came to me, to stand by him in this trouble of his, to stay and fight it out, and give what help I could to him and the boy.

I am not a superstitious man, nor counted credulous by my friends or enemies. But here was something inexplicably evil which brooded over the lonely woods of Tareytown like some dark-winged genie.

I went slowly and thoughtfully up to my room, my mind heavy with doubt and perplexity, and as the night wore on and darkness closed in about the house, so did my mind grow darker and more fearful.

3

"WELL, Soames! Rather a change from your roof-garden in New York—eh? How do you like it here?"

The old gardener folded his gnarled hands one over the other on the handle of his spade, and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"It was an unlucky day for the master when he came to Tareytown, sir—an unlucky day!"

"How's that? Won't your plants grow for you?"

"You know, sir! I see by your face that you know already!"

"I must confess there's something a bit depressing about the place," I answered. "It's just the time of year, no doubt. There's always something melancholy about the fall."

"There's nothing wrong about the time of year," said the old man. He leaned forward and his voice sank to a whisper. "Haven't you *heard* it yet?"

I gave an involuntary start, and he pursed up his mouth and nodded.

"Aye, I see you have!"

He came closer and peered up at me, his brown face with its faded blue eyes a network of anxious wrinkles.

"Sir, if you can help the master, for God's sake do it! He's a rare hard one, I know, but I've served him for thirty-five years, and I don't want to see no harm come to him. He won't own up that he hears anything amiss, nor go away from this accursed place with the boy, before any harm comes to either of them. He's that angry because he don't understand—*won't* understand there's something more

than flesh and blood can hurt us sometimes!"

The old man's words came out in a flood, the result of long-suppressed anxiety, and I marveled that a man of Jason Drewe's type should command such solicitude from anyone.

"I'm all in the dark, Soames," I said slowly. "Who is it that knocks—that laughs?"

The gardener's eyes grew very somber. "No mortal man—no mortal man, sir."

"Why, Soames, you're as superstitious as they make them," I said, trying to make light of his words.

"See here, sir," he said, pulling me by the sleeve into the deeper shade of the shrubbery behind us. "I'll tell you what I've never spoken a word of yet. I'll tell you what I overheard one night when this—this *thing* first came here. I was pottering about late one evening, tying up bits of creeper against the wall outside the master's study. I heard the knock—loud and long as if the emperor of the world was a-knocking at the door, and I looks up to see who was there. The door was only three or four feet from where I was standing with bass and scissors in my hand. And there was no one at all on the steps nor anywhere near the house. While I was a-staring and wondering I heard the laugh! My blood went cold, and I just stood there shaking like a poplar tree in a wind. And since then, night after night, that knock and that laugh comes as regular as the sun sets!"

I stared at my companion in incredulous horror.

"And one time," he continued, "I heard the master call out. Terrible loud and fierce his voice was: *'Have you come for your moonshine, Eldred Werne?—take it!'* And with that, a bottle of whisky comes hurtling through the window and fell almost at my feet. I felt a wind blow across my face same as if it blew right off an iceberg; and as I stood there afraid to move hand or foot, I heard the laugh way down among the trees, getting fainter and fainter just as if someone was walking away down the path—and laughing and laughing to himself all the time!"

I listened aghast to the old man, and a vivid picture arose in my mind of Eldred Werne as I last saw him in life—the tall, emaciated figure, the arresting face with its beautifully chiseled features, and above all the strange gray eyes as they had dwelt in that last deep look on Jason, the burning mocking fire which lit them and the fathomless contempt of the strong mouth."

"You will pay—you will pay!" The words rang in my ears as if Werne were standing at my side speaking them at that very moment.

I sat down abruptly on a fallen tree, and lit a cigarette with unsteady fingers.

"Now look here, Soames," I said at last. "We mustn't let this thing get us seared out of all common sense and reason. I admit it's a beastly unpleasant business, but I can't—I won't believe yet that there is no natural explanation of these things. Someone who owes him a grudge may be putting one over on Mr. Drewe. It may be a deliberate plot to annoy and frighten him. There was a—er—well, a misunderstanding between your master and Mr. Werne over the purchase of this Tareytown estate, and Mr. Werne was quite capable of planning a neat little revenge to square his account a little. He was a very sick man, remember—and sick men are apt to be vindictive and unreasonable."

"I guessed as something had happened between the two," murmured Soames, "but I didn't rightly know what it was."

"You and I will watch the house from now on," I said. "We'll arrange to be outside, one or other or both of us, directly after sunset. And if—if we see nothing, if we find no one there——"

"Aye—you won't, sir!"

"Then I shall do my best to persuade Mr. Drewe to leave this place and return to the city."

"And that you'll never do. He'll never give in and go away, not if it means his death. The master is terrible obstinate, and he fair blazed up when I kind of suggested he wasn't looking just himself, and that maybe Tareytown didn't agree with him."

And remembering Jason's defiant eyes and the bluff he put up last evening for my benefit, I was inclined to agree with Soames.

"I'll do what I can," I said, getting up and brushing off twigs and leaves.

"I'm thankful to know you're here, sir. There was no one I dared say a word to until you came. The servants are in mortal terror, and never a week passes without one or more of them leaving. Soon we won't be able to get anyone to stay a night in the place!"

"If your master could be persuaded to send the boy away for the rest of his vacation——"

"He won't do that," was the lugubrious reply. "That would be sort of owning up that there *was* something here he was afraid of! He'll never admit that—never!"

4

OUR first vigil took place that night. The boy was safe indoors—he never went over the threshold of the house after dusk fell, I noticed. Jason had established himself with his favorite drink, a stack of newspapers, and a box of cigars, in his library. I left him looking as immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar—and as gray!

Soames and I planted ourselves in strategic positions on either side of the porch, where we could see both the big entrance door, and the whole of the front porch which ran in front of the library, dining-room, and sun-parlor.

A pale moon sailed serenely overhead, and I felt a passionate longing to be as far away from this evil-haunted little piece of earth as was the moon itself. Revolt which was almost nausea seized me, as I looked around at the shadowy woods, and felt the unnamable creeping horror which waited there.

Slow minutes passed. The shadows grew denser, and the silence so profounded that the falling leaves rattled like metal things on the dry ground, and the creak of the great trees made my heart thump furiously against my ribs.

I could see Soames' small tense figure bent forward in a listening attitude, his face turned toward the entrance door. He looked like a terrier-dog straining eagerly on a leash.

My eyes roved restlessly to and fro, and fell at last on the long, uncut grass which grew about the tree-trunks. Quite suddenly I saw the reeds and grasses bend and quiver as if before a strong wind. In a long thin line they bent—a line advancing rapidly from the blackness of the trees out toward the open—toward the house—toward the entrance porch, with its broad steps gleaming silver in the moonlight.

My hand flew to my throat to stifle the cry that rose as I saw that sinister trail being blazed before my eyes. It advanced to the extreme edge of the tall grasses in a direct line with the entrance-door.

A moment of unendurable suspense—an agony of terrified expectant waiting! Then it came—loud—thunderous—awful as the stroke of doom! The knocker had been removed from the door, and on the bare wood itself beat that devil's tattoo.

I was paralyzed with the shock and thunder of it, and only when I saw Soames stumbling forward, and heard his hoarse cry, did I move—stiff and uncertainly as a man might move after a long illness.

We clutched each other like two terrified children when we arrived at the foot of the steps, and I felt Soames's body shaking against my own.

Then, abruptly, the infernal racket ceased; and in the momentary silence which ensued, a laugh broke out that sent our trembling hands over our ears, but we could not shut out the sound of that demoniac laughter. Uncontrolled and triumphant it rang out again and again, and the vision of someone rocking with mirth rose as before in my imagination.

But nothing was there on the porch in the moonlight!

The whole porch was visible in the clear white light. No one, no thing, could have escaped our staring, straining eyes. There was no one there, and yet almost within touch of our outstretched hands some invisible, intangible Thing stood laughing—laughing—laughing. . . .

5

AFTER that night the horror fell more and more darkly.

Soames, who was out all day working in the gardens and shrubberies, noticed increasingly sinister signs that our invisible enemy was marshaling his forces, and closing in on the last stages of the siege.

More and more frequently the old man would see the grasses bending and swaying around him in loops and circles, as though the laughing Thing moved to and fro in the mazes of some infernal dance. Often Soames felt the chill of the Thing's passing, and noted the shriveled, blighted foliage which marked its trail.

The woods grew darker with every passing day, despite the thinning of the leaves. The autumn mists which lay so white and cloudlike in the valleys of the surrounding country, drifted in among the trees on the Tareytown estate like gray, choking smoke, dank and rotten with the breath of decay, shutting out the sunlit earth beyond, and the clear skies above, rolling up around the house with infinite menace and gloom.

Louder and more clamorous grew the nightly summons, and the laughter which followed echoed and reechoed about the house throughout the night, sounding at our very windows, then growing faint and ominous from the depths of the brooding woods.

6

AT LAST, the boy's terror precipitated a crisis.

Jason, who had brought this cursed thing upon himself, it seemed, refused to acknowledge that he had been wrong, to make any amends which lay within his power, or even to move from the place which Eldred Werne had loved so passionately in the flesh, and haunted so persistently in the spirit.

Jason's courage, though I admired it in one way, was not of the highest order. I mean that his conduct was guided by no reason, but only by blind impulse.

I tackled him more than once about Tony, and only succeeded in rousing furious opposition.

"What the devil are you driving at?" he roared at me. "This is my house, isn't it? These are my woods and my lands. I paid for them according to my bond. No one is going to drive me out—no one, d'you hear? —neither man nor devil!"

"But Tony!" I protested. "You ought to consider him. He hears the servants talking. He hears whatever it is that comes knocking at your door, Jason—you know best what it is! The boy is almost beside himself with fear. Can't you see he is desperate? He doesn't eat or sleep properly. D'you want to kill him as you did his mother?" I added bitterly, remembrance of my sister's lonely,

unhappy life with Jason goading me to speech.

But Jason was always impervious to anything he wished to ignore, and he brushed aside my last words and returned to Tony.

"The boy has got to learn—he's got to learn, I say! If this house is good enough for me, then it's good enough for him, too. Tony'll stay here with me to the end of his vacation. If I give in about this thing, it will be the thin end of the wedge. He'll expect me to indulge every girl's fad and fancy he has—and the Lord knows he's full of them! Here I stay, and here he stays, and that's all about it. Why on earth do you stay yourself, feeling as you do?" he added roughly. "If you're afraid, I'll excuse you the rest of your visit."

I didn't trouble to deny the fact that I was afraid, and went off cursing myself for interfering, and probably making Tony's relations with his father even more difficult.

7

THAT evening Jason seemed absolutely possessed. Whether he had been drinking heavily, or whether his endurance had reached the breaking-point suddenly in the long, silent combat of wills with his invisible enemy, or whether the blind gray figure of Fate had written the last chapter, and he had no choice but to obey, I do not know.

Everything that happened that last fatal night seemed obscured and fogged with the waves of terror and desolation that swept over the house and the surrounding woods.

From early morning the attack on us strengthened perceptibly. Every hour I felt we were fighting a losing battle, and I had no comfort for Soames when he sought me out, and led me off to the potting-sheds after a pretense of breakfasting.

Tony had remained in bed, to his father's unbounded disgust. The boy had spent a sleepless night and I had given him a bromide and persuaded him to stay in his room to rest.

"Making a mollycoddle of him!" growled Jason, his eyes light and dangerous as a wild boar's above his flabby, sallow cheeks. He put down his cup with a rattle on the saucer, and scraping his chair noisily on the polished flooring, he rose and strode heavily out of the room, and I heard the stairs creak under his weight as he went up to the boy.

Throughout the day, his evil mood grew on him, and Tony could do nothing right.

"Mark my words, sir," Soames had said to me as we stood in the potting-sheds that morning. "I've a feeling we've about come to the end! That Laughing Devil will knock for the last time tonight—for the last time! Mark my words!"

And as the day wore on I felt more and more assured that Soames was right.

Every hour the sense of imminent and immense danger grew heavier, and every hour Tony grew more and more nervous and Jason more brutally obstinate; for the sight of the boy's terror goaded his father into senseless anger.

The sun set that night in a bank of heavy dull cloud, which spread and darkened until thick impenetrable dusk closed about us.

With the coming of twilight we waited in fearful anticipation of our usual visitation; but dusk deepened to night and no summons sounded at the door, no mocking horror of laughter was heard at all.

Yet this silence brought no feeling of reprieve. Rather our expectancy grew more and more tense, and Tony sat by the fire with cold shaking hands thrust deep into his pockets, and tried to prevent his father noticing the ague of fear which shook his thin little body.

Jason did not send him to bed at his usual time—we all sat there waiting—just waiting!

The big logs smoldered dully and reluctantly on the hearthstone. Jason's face was a gray mask; his thick lips sneered; his eyes gleamed between their puffy lids. He was like a cornered animal of some primeval age—a great inert mass of flesh slumped down in his big chair by the dying fire.

Nine—ten—eleven! The torturing hours crept on and still we sat there like people under a spell, just waiting—waiting!

With the deep midnight chime of the clock in the library, the spell was broken with a hideous clamor that made Tony leap up with the shriek of a wild thing caught in a trap.

Jason got to his feet in one surprizing movement, and stood with feet apart and lowered head, as if about to do battle.

I sat clutching the arms of my chair, held by a blind terror that was like steel chains about me.

It was the Laughing Thing at last! Long and furiously the knock resounded, sinking to a low mutter and rising to a crescendo of blows that threatened to batter down the heavy door. And over and above the thunderous blows rose the high mocking laughter—triumphant, cruel, satisfied laughter!

I blame myself—I shall always blame myself for what happened then. I might have held the boy back—guarded him more closely when he was too frenzied with fear to guard himself. But I did not dream what he was about until it was too late! When he ran from the shelter of my arms, I thought he meant to seek another refuge!

But no—the boy was crazed beyond all reason and control, and ran desperately to the very horror which had driven him mad.

I heard his quick, light steps along the hall, and I thought he was making for the staircase, not the door—my God, not the door!

There was the quick rattle of a heavy chain, the groan of a bolt withdrawn—then a long, wailing shriek of terror!

With one accord Jason and I dashed out into the hall—Soames came rushing from the kitchen-quarters—and there stood the door flung wide, and from the porch without came a long exultant peal of laughter.

We flung ourselves forward and out into the night. In the distance among the trees we heard the dying echoes of that infernal laughter—then nothing more.

8

UNTIL dawn we searched the woods of Tareytown, and as the first gray glimmer of light broke in the east we found him.

Have you ever seen anyone dead of a sudden violent poison—such as prussic acid—with teeth showing in a terrible grin—the muscles of the face stiffened in inhuman laughter? It is the most dreadful of all masks which death can fix on human lineaments.

So we found Tony!

His eyes—awful contrast to his grinning mouth—mirrored a terror too profound for any words to convey. Eyes which had looked on the unnamable—the unthinkable; spawn of that outermost darkness which no human sight may endure.

THAT night was the end of my youth and happiness. Jason packed up and went for a prolonged tour of Europe with his fears and his memories, and I have never seen him since.

For myself, I live, and will always live, on the Tareytown estate, where perhaps Tony's spirit may wander lost and lonely, still possessed by that evil which caught him in its net.

I must remain at Red Gables, and perhaps here or hereafter I may atone

for the selfish fear which made me fail Tony in that desperate crisis.

Somewhere—somehow, beyond the curtain of this life, I may meet the Thing which laughed—the evil, bitter Thing which once was Eldred Werne—the Thing which may still possess the boy and hold him earthbound and accurst.

I failed Tony once, but I will not do so a second time. I will offer my own soul to set him free—and perhaps the high gods will hear me and accept the sacrifice.

A Five-Minute Story

The Inn in the Wood

By C. I. MARTIN

IT STOOD by the white, dusty track which ran through the gloomy wood down to the wide gray sea of the Normandy coast. Before the door stood a man with a hunted face, and hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at the path which had led him here from the sea-shore.

Night was falling; in the shades of the wood it was already dark. He was wet and weary. The folds of his long cloak dripped on the dusty path as he stood. It was odd, he thought, that he had not marked the inn when he passed that way in the morning. But then he had not been alone, and had had that in his mind which might have taken him unheeding past twenty inns.

He shivered slightly as if with cold. There were many miles between him and the little fishing village he had left at dawn, and he had no fancy for retracing the path through the woods in darkness, and alone. The trees could hide many things. He would do better to spend the night here.

Yet the inn did not look very cheerful. He glanced up at the creaking sign to discover the name, but the letters were too dim. The site too was strangely chosen, for there appeared to be a graveyard on one side; dim gray shapes as of tombstones glimmered in the dusk. But what mattered that to him, if he could find warmth and shelter within? Through a window he saw a fire leap and glow. It decided him, and turning to the half-open door he was about to knock, when it was flung wide, and the host stood bowing in the doorway.

"You are welcome, *Monsieur*. Would *Monsieur* be pleased to enter?"

The traveler went in, and the plump little man barred the door. He was dressed in rusty black; a smile was on his face and his eyes shone as he looked at his guest, and rubbing his hands, predicted a terrible night. His manner was almost exulting, thought the other, and as he gazed at him he shivered, and almost wished himself out in the dark wood again, but that was folly.

He curtly demanded a room, wine and a fire by which to dry his garments. All these he could have, and that speedily. He followed his host up a flight of stairs, and still, though the door was barred below, he glanced with a hunted look over his shoulder.

At the top they entered a large room hung with faded tapestry. On it was represented the bottom of the sea, and as the wind stirred it, the fishes seemed to swim, and the long coils of seaweed to wave with the motion of the water. The traveler looked at it with distaste.

Monsieur did not like the tapestry? enquired the host. Alas! he had no other empty room, and when *Monsieur* slept it would not trouble him.

The other shrugged his shoulders and looked around. A fire leapt on the open hearth; beside it wine and glasses stood on a table; in a corner were two narrow beds, and through the open window came the distant roar of the sea.

The newcomer looked with surprize on these preparations, and his host, following his gaze, smiled and said, "*Monsieur* sees he was expected."

"But how——?" stammered the other. "I had no thought of coming here tonight."

"*Monsieur* would have found it hard to pass *this* door."

"Leave me!" he exclaimed, angry with the smile which seemed to triumph over him. "But first draw that window to. The sea roars too loudly for me tonight."

"Yet *Monsieur* has been closely acquainted with the sea today," said the little man as he advanced to do his bidding. "The sea is strong, *Monsieur*, but it does not keep all it holds."

The traveler shot a glance of terror at him, but the fat round face was as smiling as ever.

"What do you mean?" stammered the pale lips.

"Nay, what should I mean save that *Monsieur's* garments are wet? It is easy to see he has struggled," pointing as he spoke to a long rent in his cloak.

The traveler shuddered and threw the garment from him.

Still smiling, his host went out, closing the door behind him.

Once more he was alone. Drawing up a seat close to the fire he crouched over it to dry his clothes, but they dripped—and dripped—and never had done dripping. And the firelight glanced on the little pools until they looked like blood.

For a time he sat motionless, then groaned, and rising, paced to and fro. He stood still at length by the beds. In his trouble he had not before noted there were two, and he called the host up to explain.

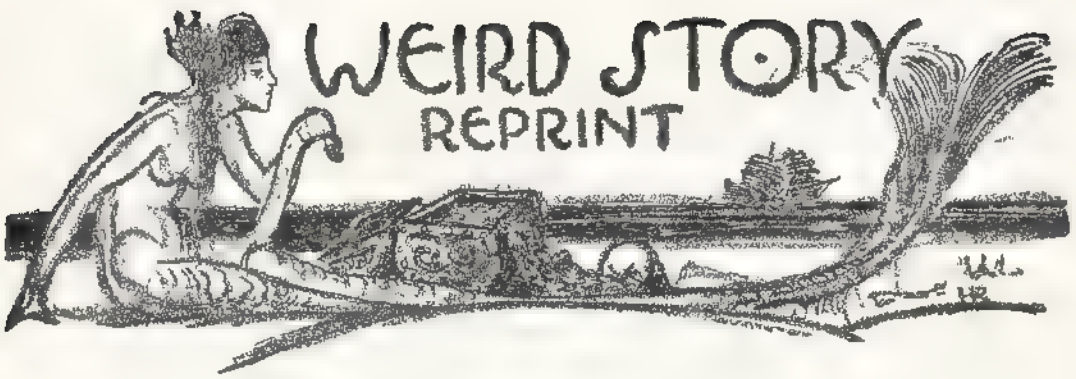
"It is the custom of the house, *Monsieur*. No one here sleeps alone," he explained with a sidelong smile.

"I share my room with no stranger," was the haughty reply.

"He will be no stranger," said the little man as he closed the door.

The wind rose, and the sea sounded louder than before. He had not thought it was so near. He flung the window open, expecting to see it through the trees. The sign creaked below. It was nearer here, and as it swung toward him he read in dim letters: "Retribution"; above was a sword and scales. And then he saw on the road a sight that made his heart stand still—a double track in the dust. He would fly, but whither? On one side was the wood, on the other the sea. He moaned, and crouched in hopeless apathy over the dying fire.

All was still now, very still. There was a stir below. Was it the host coming up again? No, it was a step he knew. It came nearer, and ever nearer, with a plashy sound upon the stairs. He crouched in the farthest corner of the room, his eyes fixed on the door. Now there was but that between him and the thing without. It opened, and on the threshold stood the brother he had drowned, with wide, unseeing eyes, and a coil of wet seaweed in his dead hand.



The Cloth of Madness*

By SEABURY QUINN

JAMISON ALVARDE, the noted interior decorator, was dying. His family physician knew it; the neat, white-starched nurse—almost waspish in her impersonal devotion to her professional duties—knew it; the eminent graduate of Hopkins and Vienna, called into consultation, whose fee would be more than the annual maintenance of a poor ward in the City Hospital, knew it; Alvarde's next of kin, a niece and nephew, hastily summoned from halfway across the continent, knew it; and—which was most important of all—Jamison Alvarde knew it.

The last rays of the December sun slanted through the casement of the sick man's room, falling directly upon the bed and illuminating his face as though with a rosy spotlight. This was fitting and proper, since he was the principal character in the short tragedy about to be enacted.

It was not an ill-looking face the afternoon sun bent its brief valedictory on. Jamison Alvarde's plentiful hair was iron-gray in color and swept up from his high, placid forehead in an even-crested pompadour. His eyebrows were heavy and intensely black, and the deepset eyes beneath them were as gray as frosted glass. While his long illness had etched fine lines about the corners of his eyes and at the ends of his narrow lips, it had not robbed his cheeks of their rich, olive coloring, and even in the antechamber of death his mouth retained its firm, almost cruel, set.

In a far corner of the room, the family physician whispered fussily to the next of kin. Waiting for a patient to die is tiresome business, especially when one is hungry and when one expects to have roast lamb with caper sauce for dinner.

"Yes, yes!" he was saying. "Mr. Alvarde has had a great deal of trouble the last year, a very great deal of trouble. He has never been the same since that terrible affliction fell upon his wife and his friend at his country place in the Highlands. A tragedy, my dear young friends, a very great tragedy; quite enough to break anyone's health. I've no doubt that Mr. Alvarde's present illness is directly traceable to that—er—unfortunate occurrence; no doubt whatever."

Alvarde's wasted, nervous hands paused a minute in their restless fumbling at the bedclothes. His thin, straight lips twisted a moment in an

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inscrutable smile, and his pale lids slowly lowered till they nearly hid his roving gray eyes. With that unwonted sharpening of the senses which often comes to those weakened in body, he had heard the doctor's whispered conversation.

The mention of that June morning when his wife and friend had been discovered in their rooms, hopelessly imbecile, brought no grimace of horror to the sick man's face. Rather, he smiled whimsically to himself, as if there were something not altogether unpleasing to him in the memory.

THE afternoon sun sank behind the line of hills across the river. The great specialist got into his fur-lined overcoat and his imported motor car and drove home. The family physician left instructions to be called immediately there was any change in Mr. Alvarde's condition and went home to his lamb and capers. The next of kin tiptoed downstairs to dinner, and Jamison Alvarde was left alone with his thoughts and the white-clad nurse.

"Nurse," Alvarde raised himself slightly on one elbow, "open the lower left-hand drawer of the desk and bring me the little black book you'll find there. . . .

"Now give me my fountain pen, please," he directed, when the sharp-featured girl had brought the book and adjusted the pillows behind his back.

The nurse withdrew to the window, watching the last spots of sunlight on the river, and Alvarde commenced to scribble on the flyleaf of the book before him. As he wrote—difficultly, for he was very weak—the same faintly reminiscent smile he had worn in the afternoon settled again on his tight-pressed lips.

Half, three-quarters, of an hour his pen traveled laboriously over the book's blank leaf; then, with a faint sigh of satisfaction, as at a task well done, Jamison Alvarde lay back upon his pillows.

The nurse crossed the room to remove the book and pen, paused a second, looking into her patient's face, then hurried to the telephone to call the family physician.

She might have saved herself the trouble and allowed the good doctor to finish his dinner in peace. Jamison Alvarde had no need of his services, or of any other physician's. Jamison Alvarde was dead.

THE customary three days elapsed, and in the morning of the fourth they took Jamison Alvarde from his residence on the Drive to a new home in Shadow Lawns. It was a very stylish and dignified funeral, for Alvarde had left a respectable estate, and the high-priced funeral director who conducted the obsequies understood his business thoroughly.

On the fifth evening Alvarde's attorney—a dapper little man, much addicted to wing collars and neat, double-breasted jackets—called and read his deceased client's last will and testament to the next of kin, who, as was expected, proved also to be his residuary legatees, one-third of the estate having been left the dead man's wife. Then the lawyer took up the business of straightening out Alvarde's affairs.

"It will be necessary," he informed them, stuffing the will back into his saddle-leather brief-bag, "to let me have all your uncle's papers which are in the house."

"The only papers of Uncle Jamison's we found in the house are bound in a little black book," the niece remarked. "He'd been writing in it just before he died."

When the little book was forthcoming and he had tucked it in his overcoat pocket, the lawyer seated himself in his automobile and started on his homeward trip. Before the motor had traversed two blocks he took out the slender volume and opened it. He

was no waster of time; his capacity for making every minute count had won him his enviable standing at the bar.

The first words which struck his eye were written in a weak, straggling hand—the words Jamison Alvarde had penned on the night of his death.

"What the devil!" the lawyer exclaimed as he slowly spelt out the sprawling characters of the inscription. "Did the old fool try to make another will on his death-bed?"

"The old fool" was his late lamented client, the commencement of whose *ante-mortem* writing was such as to warrant his assumption that a last will and testament had been attempted.

He read:

I, Jamison Alvarde, being of sound mind and memory (which is more than some I know are), but being weakened in body, and about to die, do declare the following statement to be the true explanation of the mental derangement which occurred to my wife, Edith, and my friend, Hector Fuller, at my country place last summer.

"Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord; but I anticipated Providence in demanding reparation. As a piece of revenge my work is not devoid of good points.

My one regret in publishing this memoir is that I shall not be present to hear the comments of the fools who have sympathized with me in my "affliction."

JAMISON ALVARDE.

"Humph," the lawyer turned the scribbled fly-leaf over; "so Alvarde's mind was wandering at the last, eh? Wonder how much more of this stuff he wrote in bed that night?"

The next page answered his question. Following the leaf upon which the scrawling introduction was scratched, the book was written in a firm, clear hand, the hand Alvarde had penned in health. The pages were filled with detached paragraphs, like diary entries, but undated. The first sheet was torn diagonally across, so that the first sentence was incomplete.

* * * * * *

——somewhat cool for this time of year. Excepting the tower, the house is fully completed, and we shall live here while the carpenters are finishing up.

I have asked Hector Fuller up for the week-end. Edith protested against his coming; for, with every woman's loathing of the unattainable, she has taken his impregnable bachelorhood as a deliberate affront. But Fuller is my friend, and whether Edith is pleased with his visit or not is of no moment to me. This is my house and Edith is my wife; and I mean to be master of both.

FULLER came this afternoon. I watched Edith narrowly when she greeted him, for I had determined to cut her allowance in two if she were discourteous to him. She blushed to the roots of her hair when she gave him her hand, and his face colored, too. Fuller looked uncomfortably at me out of the corner of his eye, and I caught a sidelong glance from Edith which reminded me of the look Regina, my Irish setter, gives me when she knows I am about to beat her for worrying the poultry. I was sorry for Fuller; having to be polite to a hostess who dislikes you must be uncomfortable business.

FULLER is a sly old dog! Pretending misogynist that he is, always preaching the joys of an Eveless Eden, I've caught him red-handed in a flirtation with some silly woman—and, I believe, a married one, at that.

This afternoon I came in late from inspecting the decorations of the Grayson mansion drawing-room, and as I was about to mount the stairs I noticed a bit of folded paper lying on the floor. The sight of this trash on my hall carpet angered me; I hate such clutter and disorder.

I was about to pitch the scrap of paper in the fireplace when I noticed that it was house stationery and was written on. I opened it and recognized Fuller's writing.

My darling:

The ordeal was terrible. How I hate to have to pretend; how you hate it; how I hate to see you obliged to do it! If only you-know-who would go away, so that we could cast aside this hideous mask, how happy we could be!

My dear, there are not words enough in all the languages combined to tell you how I love you. I'd rather kiss the print of your little foot in the dust than the lips of any other woman on earth. Oh, if only that brute could be got rid of!

Only a few more days, dear one, and the ghastly comedy we're playing will be finished. Then I will be at liberty to meet you once more at the old accustomed place.

My darling, my darling, I love you!

HECTOR.

"H'm!" I muttered, as I shoved the slushy thing into my jacket pocket. "'That brute' they're so anxious to be rid of is undoubtedly the lady's husband. Abuse the husband to flatter the wife, every time!"

We husbands are always brutes once we're pledged, with bell, book and candle, to provide a living for some worthless female. We're precious enough before they've put their halter on us, though, I've noticed! I dare say Edith thinks me a brute, though the devil knows it keeps my nose to the grindstone, paying for her fripperies.

I found Fuller in his room, dressing for dinner, and gave him his note.

"Next time, don't be so careless with your *billets d'amour*," I cautioned. "Someone might find it and pass it along to her husband, you know."

The shot went home. Fuller turned as pale as if a ghost had entered the room with me, and faced about with a spring, as though expecting me to attack him.

"I suppose you'll demand that I leave the house immediately?" he asked, when he saw that I had no immediate intention of assaulting him.

I laughed. "My dear boy," I told him, "it's a matter of perfect indifference to me how much you protest your hatred of the sex in public and flirt with them in private. Only you're so ungodly absent-minded with your mash notes! I found that gummy thing of yours lying in plain sight on the hall floor. Is your brain so addled with love of the fair one that you forget to post your letters to her?"

He regarded me a moment as a condemned criminal might the messenger who brings his reprieve, and jammed the note into his waistcoat pocket.

"Thanks, old man," he gulped. "Awfully good of you to bring it to me!"

"Oh, that's all right!" I assured him as I started to my own room to dress. "Don't bother about thanking me."

Funny, what a doddering fool love can make of a sensible man like Fuller.

I WISH Fuller would use more discretion in his choice of a light o' love. She uses lily of the valley.

Lily of the valley is the one thing about which Edith has defied me. Time and again I've ordered her never to bring the pestilent stuff into my house, and every time I've found a phial of it on her dressing-table I've flung it out the window; yet her hair, her finger tips and her lingerie fairly reek with it, despite my commands.

I came out late from town this evening, and Grigsby, the butler, informed me that Fuller had dropped out during the afternoon and had put up in his usual room. I stopped in his quarters for a little chat before going to bed. He had already turned in, but was still awake. His clothes were sprawled all over the room in the careless way he always throws them when he crawls into bed, and I had no choice but to share the same chair with his dinner jacket.

I'd scarcely gotten seated and lighted a cigar when I began to notice the unpleasant proximity of lily of the valley scent. At first I couldn't make out where the annoying odor

came from, but a few sniffs localized its source. Fuller's dinner jacket was redolent with the perfume.

"No doubt you find it very comforting to have your lady love rest her head on your shoulder," I grumbled, "but, for heaven's sake, why don't you get her to use some other scent? I loathe this stuff as the devil does holy water."

He gaped at me like a goldfish viewing the sunlight through the walls of an aquarium.

"What d'ye mean, 'some other scent'?" he asked. "I don't follow you."

"Why, this infernal lily of the valley." I tapped the scented shoulder of his jacket in explanation. "I hate it more than any other smell this side of H.S. Edith uses it until I think, sometimes, I'll have to commit suicide—or murder—to get rid of it."

Fuller's eyes widened like a cat's in the twilight.

"D-does Edith—Mrs. Alvarde—use that perfume?" he stammered.

"You're devilish well right, she does, *ad nauseam!*" I growled as I got up. "And for the Lord's sake, get your woman to use something else. It's bad enough to have Edith scenting up the place, without your lugging a lot of the stuff in on your clothes."

I HAVE thought the whole matter over very carefully. I shall kill them both.

The scales fell from my eyes tonight (perhaps I would better say they were snatched from my eyes) and I see what a blind, fatuous, doting cuckold I have been for the fiend only knows how long. The shame of it is maddening.

Spring has broken early this year and summer is upon us; the roses in the lower garden are budding out, and the double row of dogwood trees which flanks the drive is festival-clad in a white surplice of blossoms.

The decorations of the Grayson house were all completed today, but I had to stay late catching up a few loose ends, so that it was well after dark when I reached home.

Fuller was out on one of the visits which have become rather frequent of late, and he and Edith had dined when I arrived. She was in the music room, strumming idly on the piano and singing softly to herself when I passed through the hall. Fuller had gone to his room for some reason or other. I could hear the sickly sentimental refrain of the popular ballad she was thrumming as I went up the stairs:

There's a kiss that you get from baby,
** There's a kiss that you get from Dad,**
There's a kiss that you get from Mother,
** That's the first real kiss you've had.**
There's a kiss with a tender meaning,
** Other kisses you recall;**
But the kisses I get from you, sweetheart,
** Are the sweetest kisses of all.**

Something in the spring air, the shower of pearl moonbeams I'd just driven through, or the appealing lilt of the song downstairs—perhaps all three—set my pulses throbbing at an unwonted tempo; I climbed the last ten steps humming the silly words under my breath:

There's a kiss with a tender meaning,
** Other kisses you recall. . . .**

In his room across the hall from mine Fuller was moving about, alternately whistling and humming the same banal refrain. The words came softly through the closed door of his room:

** Other kisses you recall,**
But the kisses I get from you, sweetheart,
** Are the sweetest kisses of all.**

Strange how a snatch of song on a spring evening will carry a man's mind back to scenes he has never thought to see reflected on his memory's screen again. As I knotted my tie I remembered my first sweetheart, pretty and blue-eyed and blond. I used to have a trick of pulling off her glove when I brought her home from

some party, and kissing all five of her pink little fingers.

Poor Elsie; when her husband died he left no insurance and God knows how many children. She came to me for help, but she had no business qualifications, couldn't even type; so there was nothing I could do for her.

Then there was another girl—a slender thing with a painted face, a robemaker's manikin. Her masculine acquaintances had been the sort who wear colored derby hats and converse in terms of the race-track and pool-room. I was the first man of breeding she had known, and she was as grateful for the common or garden variety of courtesy as a stray dog for a scrap of meat.

She knew only one medium of exchange, and her timid little offers of passion were pitiful to see.

I gave her three hundred dollars; rather a handsome settlement, considering our respective positions. A child more or less doesn't matter to her kind. . . . I've often wondered what became of her. . . .

Fuller was still singing to himself when I finished dressing and went down to the dining-room. Edith had left the house and was sitting on a stone bench at the lower end of the terrace, watching the boats go by on the river below. In her white dinner frock, with the moonlight on her arms and shoulders, she was almost as pale as the marble Psyche at the other end of the walk.

A chilly breath of wind swept up from the river, rustling the dogwood blossoms and shaking the scrim curtains at the dining-room windows. Edith felt it as it passed and shivered a little.

"She'll be cold without her wrap," I speculated as I poured myself a stiff appetizer of Irish whisky and rang for Grigsby to serve dinner.

A bar from the song recurred to me:

> **There's a kiss with a tender meaning . . .**
> **But the kisses I get from you, sweetheart . . ."**

I went into the music-room, picked up Edith's China-silk scarf, and stepped through the French window to the lawn.

Walking quietly across the short-cut grass, I approached her from the rear, softly humming the refrain.

"But the kisses I get from you, sweetheart, are the sweetest kisses of all," I finished aloud, dropping the shawl over her narrow shoulders, putting my hands over her eyes, and bending forward to kiss her full upon the lips.

Her white, thin hands flew up from her lap and clasped about my neck, drawing my cheek close to hers.

"Oh!" she cried, and the exclamation was about a sob, "my dear, my dear, I've been thinking you'd never come! I've been so lonesome."

Then she struck me playfully on the cheek and gave a sniff of disapproval.

"Hector," she scolded, "you've been drinking that horrid Irish whisky, and you know how I hate it. *He* uses it!"

I released her eyes and sprang back, livid with fury. So this was the explanation of that lovesick note I'd found in my hall when Fuller was here before! This accounted for the scent on his dinner jacket; this was the clue to his sudden craze for coming unannounced to my house—always when I was from home.

But my mind worked with the agility of a leaping cat. Before Edith had time to recover from the horror the discovery of her error had given her, I had landed fairly on my mental feet.

I threw back my head and laughed; laughed naturally, laughed uproariously.

"By the Lord Harry, old girl," I cried, pounding my thigh in a perfect paroxysm of counterfeit mirth, "that's the best joke I've heard you spring in years! Everyone knows you hate Hector Fuller worse than a hen hates a rainstorm, and now you

call me by his name and pretend you thought you were kissing him!" Again I rocked forward in a spasm of laughter. "And I can just about imagine how you'd have written the ten commandments on his face with your nails if it really had been Fuller!"

All the while I was watching her as a snake does a bird, noting the look of blank amazement which slowly replaced the terrified gaze she had first turned to me when she discovered her mistake.

"Let's go in the house and have some music; it's too cold for you out here, dear," I concluded, as soon as I had calmed down my mock amusement.

She rose as obediently as a well-trained dog and accompanied me across the lawn in silence. But she shuddered slightly as I put my arm about her. Women have no control of their emotions.

While I smoked three or four cigarettes, she played and sang for me, and then, pleading a headache—the old, threadbare excuse of all her sex since Eve first left the garden—begged leave to go up to bed.

I let her go and went out to the stable. I harnessed the cob to the village cart and drove furiously along the country lanes for three hours, lashing the horse fiercely whenever he dropped out of a gallop. The poor brute was nearly foundered when I turned him home; but I was as raging wild as ever.

I have thought the whole matter over very carefully. I shall kill them both.

LAST night I said I should kill them both. Today I know I must kill them, or they will surely kill me. A sentence from Fuller's treacherous note to Edith has been pounding in my head all day with the monody of a funeral dirge:

". . . if that brute could only be got rid of!"

When faithless wives and false friends conspire to be rid of an inconvenient husband the number of his days is appointed. The dockets of our criminal courts bear eloquent testimony of that.

A weakling would seek divorce as the easy solution of my difficulty; but I am no maudlin fool, ready to efface myself, leaving the way clear for them to flaunt their triumph and my dishonor before the world. I appeal from the fool-made and fool-administered law that offers divorce, to the higher law which ruled when the winds first soughed through the primeval forests; the law which the wise old Hebrew summed up with his terse, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

I must be very careful in my execution of these two, this man who has ravished away my honor before my eyes and the woman who has sold my good name for a kiss. Except for them, no one must suspect my vengeance; for it is no part of my plan to die like a felon for having exacted the justice which the law denies me.

I must kill them, but I must be careful—very careful.

IF I were a superstitious man I should say that the Fates have decided to aid me in the furtherance of my plans. While I was lunching at the Republique today, Howard Enright dropped into the chair opposite me. I greeted him sourly enough, for I was in no mood for conversation, but he refused to be rebuffed.

He is just back from an extended tour of the East, where he has picked up enough expensive junk for his house to fill three museums and impoverish half a dozen millionaires. Despite my curt answers, he rambled on about the thousand and one *objets de vertu* he'd lugged half-way around the world, until I was ready to believe that he'd brought the whole *Arabian*

Nights home with him. Othello's tales of

> . . . anthropophagi,
> And men whose heads do grow below their shoulders,

were hackneyed beside the wonders Enright would display at his galleries.

He had a jade Buddha that caught and held the sunlight until the beholder was ready to swear that the image was filled with living fire. He had lachrymatories from Persia—tall, spindle-necked bottles, coming in pairs, into which the Persian widows wept, that the fullness of the bottles might be an outward and visible sign of the fullness of their grief at their husbands' taking-off. He had a great fan from Korea, where there was an ancient custom that no widow might remarry till her husband's grave was dry. The fan, he explained, was to be used by the lady in hastening the aridness of her lord's burial mound. He had bits of porcelain from the dynasties of Han and Ming—things so fragile that the Chinese called them "frozen air," and so precious that they were worth their weight in rubies.

I was thoroughly bored by his graphic cataloguing of the stock of his junkshop, and had given up the attempt to stifle a yawn, when he wound up with:

"And I've something else, Alvarde, that will appeal to you as an interior decorator."

"Indeed?" I masked the yawn with my hand.

"Yes, sir. Weirdest thing you ever saw; regular old marrow-freezer! They call it 'the cloth of madness,' and there's a legend to the effect that whoever looks at it loses his reason. Some vengeful old raja had it woven for the special benefit of some friends he suspected of forgetting that the harem is sacred, inviolate."

"Well, did it work?" I queried, more for the sake of politeness than anything else.

"They say it did. According to tradition he had an asylumful of crazy friends and acquaintances in less than no time. Anyhow, I couldn't get one of the natives to look at the thing. Rummy lot, those Indians."

I smiled my appreciation of the wily old maharaja's finesse.

"What does it look like, this 'cloth of madness' of yours?" I asked.

"Oh," Enright spread his hands wide in preparation for an eloquent description, "it's—it's—it's—— Oh, hang it all, man, I can't describe the beastly thing to you! All red and full of funny, twisty black lines, like snakes and lizards and—why, Alvarde, it's like an X-ray of a guilty conscience! Come around to the shop and see for yourself; I'd never be able to make you imagine the thing's damnable fascination."

"There might be an idea for some bizarre pattern in wall-hanging," I reflected. "New designs are hard to find nowadays." So I went with him to the shop.

He undid several yards of coco-matting wrappings and unfurled a small oblong of crimson cloth for my inspection.

At first sight of the thing I was ready to laugh in his face; for, save for a rather unusual combination of involuted and convoluted black lines and stripes on the cloth's red ground, it seemed to differ in no particular from hundreds of other Oriental tapestries.

Enright must have seen the unspoken skepticism in my face, for the corners of his small hazel eyes wrinkled in amusement.

"Go ahead and laugh," he invited, "but I'll bet you ten dollars that you'll be ready to cry 'nough' by the time you've looked at it steadily for five minutes."

For answer I drew a bill from my pocket and placed it on a tabouret, without taking my eyes from the bit of weaving.

Enright matched my note with one of his, and drew back, smiling whimsically at me through the smoke of his cigar.

"Hand me your ten when the five minutes are up," I ordered, keeping my gaze fixed on the cloth.

"Easy now," he counseled, glancing at his watch; "you've only been looking forty seconds, so far."

One who has never tried it has no conception of how time drags while the eyes are focused on an immovable object. In the quiet of the storeroom I could hear the ticking of Enright's watch distinctly, and the ticks seemed a minute apart. An almost uncontrollable desire to rub my eyes, to shut them, to direct them anywhere but at the cloth, came over me. The writhing broad and narrow black bands on the ruby surface seemed to be slowly coming to life. They wound and twisted, one upon another, like the shadows of scores of snakes suspended in the sunlight. They seemed alternately to advance and retreat upon their glaring resting-place, and my eyes ached with the effort to follow their serpentine movements.

I began to be obsessed with the thought that there really were reptiles—dozens of them, scores of them, hundreds of them—behind me; that they would drop upon me any moment, smearing my body with their loathsome slime, tearing my flesh with their fangs, filling my blood with their deadly venom.

"Time up?" I called, my voice sounding hoarse and croaking in my own ears.

"Only two minutes more to go," Enright answered pleasantly.

"I'll—stick—it—out—if—it—kills—me!" I muttered between my teeth, and, covering my eyes with my hands, fell choking and gasping to my knees.

The infernal cloth had won. Scornful and determined as I had been, it had worn my nerves to shreds and made a whimpering, fear-crazed thing of me in three minutes.

"How much will you take for that thing, Enright?" I asked, when I had recovered my composure to some extent.

"More than you're able to give, son," he replied. "I'll get a half-grown fortune from some museum for that bit of fancy work or my name isn't Howard Enright."

"Well," I temporized, "will you rent it to me, then? I'd like to have a modified copy of it made by my paper manufacturer. Some client with a diseased mind might want a chamber of horrors done, and a denatured copy of this cloth would be just the thing."

"Promise me on your honor as a gentleman not to have a duplicate made, and I'll lend it to you for forty-eight hours for nothing," Enright offered.

"Done!" I agreed.

I took the tapestry to my papermaker this afternoon. I have ordered two rolls of paper made in exact imitation of it. I shall paper the unfinished tower room with it.

THE trap is set. Working at night, and without help, I have hung the walls and ceiling of the tower attic room with the paper. This room is small, hardly more than a large closet, and, being originally intended for a lumber room, is without windows or other communication with the outside except a small fresh-air vent in the roof.

With an idea of obtaining the maximum amount of room for storage purposes, I had dispensed with all wood trim and had the door made flush with the wall. This renders the place ideal for my purpose, for I am able to cover every fractional inch of wall space with the paper; so that, when the door is closed, the maddening design is presented to the gaze from every direction except the floor. This I have painted white, the better

to reflect the glare from the cluster of high-power nitrogen-filled electric lights I have placed in the ceiling.

Early this morning, when I had finally completed my work, I switched on the full force of light and looked about me.

From above, the glare of the electric bulbs beat down like the fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah; from the white floor the reflection smote my eyes like splinters of incandescent metal, and from the walls and ceiling the writhing, tortuous design of the demoniacal paper glared like (to use Enright's description) "an X-ray of a guilty conscience."

I had been careful to leave the door open when I tried my experiment. Lucky for me I did; for I had scarcely glanced once round the hideous apartment when I began to feel the same panic fear I had experienced when I first looked at the cloth in Enright's store. My eyes seemed bulging from their sockets; my breath came hot and quick, like the breath of a sleeper bound fast in a nightmare, and I all but lost my sense of direction. It was with great effort that I found the open door and staggered through it, with the sweat of mortal terror standing on my forehead.

I have been very good to Edith these last few days. I have endeavored to anticipate her every wish; have come back from the city loaded with bonbons and flowers like a country bumpkin wooing his sweetheart; I have doubled her allowance of spending money.

Last evening, after dinner, she kissed me, of her own volition. I felt my plan for vengeance weaken a little as her arms went round my neck. . . . Fool! Her lips are soiled with another man's kisses; her arms are tainted with the embraces of her paramour.

I looked into her eyes, warm and brown and bright, and wondered how often they had shone with love of Fuller. How long, I wondered, had it been since the same arm which rested on my shoulder had clasped the neck of the man who called himself my friend—and stole my honor like a common thief?

I shall invite Fuller to the house to spend the week-end. My trap is set; now to snare the quarry.

IT IS done.

Last week I mentioned casually to Edith that I had asked Fuller up for the week-end. I saw her eyes brighten at the suggestion, but chose to misinterpret the sign.

"It's no use making a fuss about it," I told her. "I know you don't like him; but I want him here, so you might just as well make the best of it."

She made no reply, simply rose and left the room. As a play-actor Edith is a sad failure. I suppose she feared her joy would be too apparent, even to a doting fool husband, if she remained.

When Fuller came I made a great show of urging her to be courteous to him, and greeted him cordially myself.

Fuller's was a charming personality. Quick-witted, loquacious, well read and much traveled, he was an ideal guest, providing his own and his host's entertainment. We passed a pleasant afternoon together.

I never saw Edith more charming than at dinner that night. There was a faint flush in her face, her eyes were very bright. She was wearing a gown of silver over sapphire, and had a jasmine blossom pinned in the smooth coils of her chocolate-colored hair.

The corners of my mouth flexed grimly at sight of the flower. Once, when I was in South America, I had seen a vicious knife duel between two men, and when I asked the cause of the brawl, I was told that one had offered the other's sister a jasmine bloom. Jasmine, they explained, was the symbol of inconstancy. Strange,

that of all the flowers in my grounds and conservatory Edith should have chosen the badge of infidelity to wear that night!

From my seat at the head of the table I could see Fuller worshiping Edith with his eyes. There was that in his adoring gaze which gave one to think of a mediæval knight kneeling humbly at his fair lady's feet, while her husband was off to the crusades.

We had coffee in the music room. Edith seemed ill at ease, fumbling with her cup, twirling the stem of her liqueur glass between her fingers, toying nervously with her cigarette. Before Fuller and I had finished, she rose abruptly and went to the piano.

There was no light burning in the room, and the moon laid a path of mother-of-pearl across the polished floor. With the silver radiance of the moonlight on the silver meshes of her gown, Edith was white as a wraith of the night. A snatch from Oscar Wilde's *Salome* flashed through my mind:

> She is like a dead woman; a dead woman who covers herself with a veil and goes seeking for lovers.

I smiled to myself in the darkness. "She will seek no more after tonight," I reflected.

> "Ah, moon of my delight, that know'st no wane,
> The moon of heav'n is rising once again;
> How oft hereafter rising shall she look
> Through this same garden after one—in vain?"

she sang. I rose and began to pace the room.

Gradually, taking great pains to be impersonal about it, I swung the conversation to stories of vengeance wreaked by outraged husbands on faithless wives and their paramours. Incidentally, I recounted the legend of the cloth of madness; how the Indian prince had demanded his treacherous friends' sanity as the price of their perfidy.

Edith's hands fluttered among the sheets of music on the piano; a leaf of it fell to the floor. Fuller leaped gallantly to his feet to retrieve it for her, and their hands came together in the moonlight. I saw his fingers close round hers and give them a reassuring pressure.

"What would you do, Alvarde, if you caught another man trespassing on your wife's affections?" Fuller suddenly shot at me. "Kill him?"

Edith gave a short little choking gasp and put her hand to her throat very suddenly. She had always been afraid of me.

"My dear man," I drawled, "do I look like such a fool?"

"Fool?" he echoed wonderingly.

"Precisely; 'fool' is what I said. Why should I hang for another man's sin? I rather think the old raja's method of revenge would appeal to me."

"But, you know," he objected, "the cloth of madness is only a myth."

"So is my wife's incontinence," I answered shortly. "One is quite as possible as the other."

And so we let the talk of betrayed friendship and its price drop, and passed to a discussion of interior decorations.

I told them of my more unusual bits of work for a while, then suggested:

"Let's go to the tower rooms. I've evolved a new scheme in wall-hangings for them. One of the rooms especially will interest you two."

We went through the larger rooms, I pointing out the novelties in color scheme, pattern and wood trim, they taking only a perfunctory interest in my designs.

At the door of the storeroom I stood aside to let them pass. Edith paused at the threshold, looking questioningly, fearfully, into the velvety darkness of the little chamber. Fuller stepped before her.

"Let me go first," he said; "it's dark in there."

"Yes," I echoed, all the smoldering resentment I had felt for months

flaming up in my voice, "it is dark in there, but"—my words rose nearly to a shriek—"we'll lighten it."

I put out my hand, pushing Edith roughly through the doorway after Fuller, slammed the door, locked it, and pressed the switch which controlled the electric lights. Then I bent listening at the keyhole.

For the space of a long breath all was silent in the little room; then there was a deep-drawn sigh, whether from Edith or Fuller I could not say.

"Well, what's next?" I heard him ask. "If this is Jamison's idea of a joke, I think he's showing mighty poor taste."

An insane desire to chuckle came over me. They'd see, very soon, whether I was joking. I wanted to pound on the door; to shout aloud and bid them look about them; to tell them what lay in store.

"Hector," it was Edith speaking in a still, frightened whisper, "he *knew!*"

Fuller's steps sounded harshly on the bare, polished floor of the empty room as he strode about it, seeking an exit; his fists pounded the walls in search of the hidden door. I had to stifle the laughter in my throat; for I knew how the rounded walls, the unbroken monotony of the crimson and black paper, and the glaring reflection from the white floor would confound his sense of direction. He was pacing the room like a blind, caged beast, striking the walls again and again in the same place, and meeting with no more success than an imprisoned bumble-bee flying at the transparent walls of a poison-jar.

For several minutes he continued his futile efforts; then I heard him withdraw to the center of the room.

There was a faint rustle of skirts. She was shrinking up against him.

"She's in his arms, now," I muttered. "Let her cling to him; let him hold her. I wish them joy of each other."

Several minutes more. Then:

"Hector, I'm afraid; I'm terrified. Hold me close, dear."

I bit my lips. Would that devil's design on the walls never begin to work?

"Hector," this time the words came quaveringly, as though she were fighting back a chill, "that paper on the wall—does it seem to you as if the figures on it were moving?"

"Yes, dear."

"They are like snakes—like horrible twisting snakes. I feel as though they were going to spring at me from the walls."

"A-a-h!" I murmured to myself, rubbing my hands together softly, like one who has won a wager. "They're beginning to notice now."

Fuller took several quick, decided steps from the room's center, walking directly toward the door. I drew back and seized a chair, ready to strike him down if he succeeded in breaking through the light wooden frame. I had not counted on his retaining his faculties so long, and had taken no precautions to reinforce the lock, trusting the paper with which it was covered to mask the door effectively.

Within a foot or so of the door he paused irresolutely, waited a moment, and retreated.

"I can't do it!" he almost wailed. "I can't bear to put my hands against that wall!"

"Hector!" This time there was no mistaking the panic in Edith's voice; every word came with a gasp. "The paper—the paper on the wall; it—it's—the—cloth—of—madness! It's that awful tapestry he told us about tonight."

"My God, girl," his reply came thickly, as though his tongue were swollen in his mouth, "you're right!"

I could hear them breathing heavily, like spent runners after a race, or those in the presence of mortal danger.

Softly, there came the sound of Edith's sobbing. Very low it was,

and very pitiful, like the disconsolate heart-broken sobbing of a little child who has lost its mother, and is afraid.

"Oh!" she whimpered, "let me hide my face against you, dear. Don't let me look at those ghastly things on the walls. You must shut your eyes, too, dear; you must not look either."

I waited patiently outside the door. Even closed eyes, I knew, could not withstand the intense glare of those lights and the fascination of those flame-colored walls.

Her resolution broke even sooner than I had expected.

"I can't bear the darkness," she wailed. "I must look, I must see them—the horrible snakes, the hideous snakes that are beckoning to me from the walls. Hold me, Hector darling; don't let me move—don't let me go to them! Hold me fast in your arms."

Another pause. Dimly I caught another noise—one that I had not heard before. Sharp and syncopated it was, like the clicking of castanets heard from a distance. It puzzled me at first; then recognition burst upon me, and I had to thrust my tongue against my teeth to keep from laughing aloud. It was a sound I'd heard on very cold nights when I'd passed shivering newsboys filching a little heat from above some engine-room grating. It was the sound of chattering teeth.

It was warm that night; the temperature in that little, poorly ventilated room, with those great lights burning in it, must have been like the entrance to Avernus; yet their teeth were chattering like a monk's clap-dish. Stark, freezing terror had them by the throats.

I was striding softly across the floor, digging my nails into my palms in an effort to keep from giving audible vent to my feeling of triumph, when my steps were arrested by a titter from the room beyond. Edith was laughing, not mirthfully, but with the shrill cachinnation of hysteria. In a moment her quavering treble was seconded by a deep, masculine baritone. The pair of them were laughing in concert, and from the cracking strain in their voices I knew that they were trying with all their strength to keep silence, yet laughed the harder as they strove.

I turned on my heel and descended to the dining-room. No need to listen further, I knew. A few hours more, at most, and my revenge would be complete. I was shivering a little, myself.

Downstairs, I poured out a stiff peg of Scotch. Raising my glass I looked out into the moonlight, apostrophizing the old raja who invented the cloth of madness.

"Here's to you, brother!" I said as I turned my glass bottom up.

Shortly after midnight I climbed the stairs to the tower and stopped before the door of the little room where I left them. I listened intently for a minute. There was no more sound from beyond the door than if it had barred the entrance to a tomb.

I pressed the electric switch, reducing the force of the lights within by half, then unlocked the door and opened it a crack, peering through the narrow opening.

Inside, everything was still, still as a nursery at midnight.

Fuller was sitting upright in the middle of the floor, an inane smirk overspreading his face. His collar and tie were undone, his waistcoat was unbuttoned, his shirt-front was partly loosened from its studs, and much wrinkled. His tongue protruded from his mouth, hanging flaccidly over his lower lip, as though he had lost control of it. Altogether, he was a figure of comic tragedy, like that character of Victor Hugo's whose face had been so horribly deformed in childhood that, no matter what his emotion was, he could do nothing but grin.

Nearer the door, just as she had fallen, lay Edith. One arm was ex-

tended, the hand resting palm up on the floor, the fingers slightly curled, like a sleeping child's. Her cheek lay pillowed on her arms. Her hair was a little disarranged and the jasmine flower had fallen from it. One of her satin pumps had dropped off and lay gaping emptily beside her, exposing her narrow, silk-cased foot. I could see the veins of her instep showing blue against the white flesh under her silver-tissue stocking. Her lips were parted very slightly.

The air of the place was heavy with the perfume of lily of the valley.

I gathered her in my arms, and she whimpered a little, like a child that is disturbed in its sleep, as I carried her down to her room.

It was difficult business disrobing her and getting her into bed, for she seemed to have lost all control of her muscles, even being unable to take the pins from her hair.

Fuller was a heavy man, but somehow I managed to drag him downstairs and tumble him into bed, being careful to scatter his clothes about the room as was his custom when turning in late.

Last of all I returned to the tower and worked like a fiend, obliterating every trace of the wall-paper's design with the gray paint I had hidden away for that purpose. Two hours' heart-breaking work, and the little room was as demure in its fresh coating of Quaker drab as a nun's cell. A neat, well-lighted storeroom it was, nothing more. Every lingering sign of the cloth of madness was hidden away forever.

I slept well into the morning next day, rousing only when Grigsby came rushing into my room and shook me roughly by the shoulder.

"Mr. Alvarde, sir," he panted, his eyes bulging from his face like a terrified frog's, "something terrible has happened, sir!"

"What's the matter?" I growled at him sleepily. "Cook gone on a strike?"

"Oh, no, sir, no!" He wrung his hands together in anguish. "It's really terrible, sir! Mr. Fuller's a-sittin' on the edge of his bed, a-tryin' to put both feet into one leg of his trousers, sir, and he's smilin' something awful." And Grigsby attempted to twist his heavy features into an imitation of Fuller's demented grin.

I got into my slippers and robe and started across the hall for Fuller's room, running full tilt into Agnes, the waitress. When Edith had failed to come down long after her usual breakfast hour, Agnes had gone upstairs to see what was detaining her, and had come running to me, fear written in every line of her face.

"Oh, sir, something's wrong with Mrs. Alvarde! I went in to call her, and she wouldn't answer me, nor look at me, nor nothing; just lies there and laughs and mumbles at herself, like she was a baby!"

"You're a pair of fools," I told her and Grigsby. "You stay here; I'll go and see for myself."

It was true. Fuller was as perfect an imbecile as was ever confined in an asylum, and Edith's mental timepiece had been turned back thirty-five years. No babe in arms was ever more helpless in body and mind than she.

The papers and the doctors and the neighbors made a great fuss about it. Everyone sympathized with my unfortunate wife and friend and wondered how I could stand my terrible misfortune with such fortitude. I closed the house and sold it at a loss several months later.

Edith is still at a sanatorium, and the physicians look sorrowfully at me when I go out to visit her, and tell me that she will never be anything but a grown-up infant, though she will probably live to a ripe old age.

Fuller's malady has taken a turn for the worse. Last month they had

to restrain him with a strait-jacket. He was raving about some strange kind of cloth—what it was they couldn't make out—and threatening to kill me: me, his best and oldest friend!

"Let me go first, it's dark in there!" Fuller said when he and Edith stood at the entrance of the storeroom. I've often wondered which one of them went into the darkness of insanity first. Edith, I imagine; women have no control of their emotions.

I AM a sick man. The physician tells me that there's nothing to worry about, but I read my death sentence in his eyes. If there's such a place as the hell the preachers tell of, I suppose I'll go there. At least, I'll have to die to do it; Edith and Fuller got theirs here, and it will last through all the long years they live like brute beasts in their madhouse cells.

* * * * * * *

JAMISON ALVARDE'S attorney closed the little black book with a snap and pursed his lips. Anyone looking at him would have said that he was about to whistle.

"Yes," he said meditatively, tapping his knee with the little book, "if there's a hell he's undoubtedly there now! It's a pity if he isn't. This scheme of things certainly seems to require a hell—a good hot one, too!"

The Haunted House

By CRISTEL HASTINGS

It stands deserted through the mildewed years;
Its only friends the wind and evening star
And the gray mist that rains its dripping tears
And wonders who its ghostly tenants are.

They say it's best to take the upper trail
Where sunshine floods the flowered, perfumed way,
Avoiding an old road where thistles sail
And blank-eyed windows stare back, gaunt and gray.

They say the walls have bullet-tunneled holes,
And that the rats run screeching through the night;
They say queer shapes slip out and walk the knolls,
Seeking the souls that long ago took flight.

Queer lights glow where the zero hour sounds,
And winds moan through the empty, aching halls;
And as they bend the trees, a shadow bounds
From room to room, and sends its shrieking calls.

Forgotten with each dawn the moaning croon,
The screeching rats, the shadow shapes that strode;
But if I *must* go by, even at noon,
It's just as well to take the upper road.

IT IS now more than six years since the first copy of WEIRD TALES appeared on the news stands. The magazine was created to fill a very real demand for something radically different, something that would let the fancy escape from the humdrum, everyday life of the world; a magazine whose stories should plumb the depths of occult horror, as Lovecraft has done in so many of his tales; a magazine that should not shrink from the terrible mysteries of madness and wild imagination, but should deal boldly with what Clark Ashton Smith in one of his memorable sonnets calls life's

"dark, malign and monstrous music, spun
In hell, from some delirious Satan's dream."

Here at last was to be a magazine whose readers could not begin a story with the bland assurance that the hero would triumph in the final paragraphs, and all turn out sweetly in the time-honored stereotyped manner, and the heroine be surely rescued.

The magazine, we believe, has lived up to the aims of the founders, and has provided a feast of imaginative literature that has entrenched it thoroughly in the affections of its readers, and assured its continued success as long as we continue to play fair with you by printing superb weird tales such as we have given you in the past—stories that reach out into the depths of space and picture such beings as Donald Wandrei describes in *The Red Brain;* stories of such cataclysmic horror as H. P. Lovecraft depicts in *The Rats in the Walls;* stories that sound the abysses of physical suffering as H. Warner Munn does in *The Chain;* fantastic tales surcharged with beauty and sweetness and light, such as *The Wind That Tramps the World,* by Frank Owen; epochal masterpieces such as E. Hoffmann Price's sublime little tale of devil-worship, *The Stranger From Kurdistan,* with its audacious close; superb imaginative master-works of literary craft such as A. Merritt's tale of the revolt of the forest, *The Woman of the Wood.* It is our aim to continue to give you such marvelous weird tales as these; for it is on these stories, and others like them, that the brilliant success of WEIRD TALES has been built.

"I have been a reader of your remarkable magazine for six years and I

can not remember having read a single unworthy story in WEIRD TALES during all that time," writes Vernon V. Johnson, of Spokane, Washington. "My vote for first choice goes to *The Star-Stealers,* by Edmond Hamilton. The story was a remarkable display of imagination and was very well told."

Writes R. E. Don, of Mt. Pleasant, Michigan: "I turn to WEIRD TALES when I feel that my imagination is becoming stagnant. I find it a relief, a blessed relief, from the actualities and tragedies of life. In fact, I am so well satisfied with WEIRD TALES that I often champion it with some success when discussing magazines and literature in general with the head of the English department of the college I am attending."

Mrs. Charles Brandenburg, of Hot Springs, Arkansas, writes to the Eyrie: "You have heard from me many times, as I have been reading WEIRD TALES several years and ever so often I feel the urge to 'burst forth in a song of praise'. We are told that certain people possess 'it', and I just want to say that I am certain your magazine possesses 'it' to the nth degree, as I can hardly wait for the new copy each month. I am strong for South Sea stories and African voodoo."

"The March issue of WEIRD TALES is about the best I have read in a long time," writes E. Irvine Haines, editor of the *National Insurance News.* "I particularly enjoyed Seabury Quinn's reprint story, *The Phantom Farmhouse,* and it is, I think, one of the best he has ever written. *The Immortal Hand,* by Arlton Eadie, and *The Deserted Garden,* by Derleth, were the best in order in that issue."

Fred W. Fischer, Jr., of Knoxville, Tennessee, asks us to bring out further books of stories from WEIRD TALES, and makes the following suggestions: "Besides your *The Moon Terror,* which I already have in my bookcase, I hope soon to add these novels, eh?—*Stories by Greye La Spina; Weird Tales,* by H. P. Lovecraft; *Orientales,* by E. Hoffmann Price; *The Werewolf's Clan,* by H. Warner Munn; *The Waning of a World,* by W. Elwyn Backus; *The Phantom-Fighter,* by Seabury Quinn, and *The Return of the Ghost-Breaker,* by the same wonderful writer (these would be the adventures of Jules de Grandin); *Wonder Tales, Interplanetary Tales, The Eye of Prophecy,* by various authors; and: *Tales of Doom,* by Edmond Hamilton—boy, how I crave this last-named collection!"

Jerome Fogel, of Brooklyn, writes to the Eyrie: "I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES for the past two years, since I was fourteen. Its chief attraction for me was then, and is now, its originality not only in subject-matter, but also in method of treatment."

Writes Miss Viola Sheddy, of Burnham, Pennsylvania: "I certainly enjoy reading WEIRD TALES, and am always sure not to miss a number. I enjoyed *When the Green Star Waned,* also *The Oath of Hul Jok,* by Nictzin Dyalhis. A friend of mine, who has been reading W. T. longer than I, mentioned a story by the same author, called *The Eternal Conflict,* in flowing language;

(Continued on page 710)

FUTURE ISSUES

A WEALTH of fascinating stories is scheduled for early publication in WEIRD TALES, the unique magazine. The brilliant success of WEIRD TALES has been founded on its unrivaled, superb stories of the strange, the grotesque and the terrible—gripping stories that stimulate the imagination and send shivers of apprehension up the spine—tales that take the reader from the humdrum world about us into a deathless realm of fancy—marvelous tales so vividly told that they seem very real. WEIRD TALES prints the best weird fiction in the world today. If Poe were alive he would undoubtedly be a contributor. In addition to creepy mystery stories, ghost-tales, stories of devil-worship, witchcraft, vampires and strange monsters, this magazine also prints the cream of the weird-scientific fiction that is written today—tales of the spaces between the worlds, surgical stories, and stories that scan the future with the eye of prophecy. Among the amazing tales in the next few issues will be:

THE INN OF TERROR, *by Gaston Leroux*

A powerful new story of stark realism and uncanny, gripping horror, by the author of "The Phantom of the Opera."

THE CORPSE-MASTER, *by Seabury Quinn*

An eery tale of the dead that walk, and corpses that rise in the night—an amazing story about the fascinating French occultist and scientist, Jules de Grandin.

THE WISHING-WELL, *by E. F. Benson*

A vivid story of a weird Cornish superstition, black magic, and the gruesome power of an elemental, by a well-known British weird story writer.

BLACK TANCRÈDE, *by Henry S. Whitehead*

An eldritch story of a ghostly black hand, and an escaped Haitian slave who was put to death by degrees on an island in the Danish West Indies.

THE ABYSMAL INVADERS, *by Edmond Hamilton*

A horror out of long-dead ages rises out of an Illinois swamp—a mighty, resistless menace that crashes gigantically through the night in an avalanche of destruction and death.

THE DEATH TOUCH, *by Chester L. Saxby*

Frozen in the ice they found Yardley, there in the southern wastes, and his cold, clutching fingers sapped the vital magnetism from the bodies of the crew, leaving them white as leprosy.

DEMON DOOM OF N'YENG SEN, *by Bassett Morgan*

The author of "The Devils of Po Sung" returns again to the South Seas for another gripping tale of brain-transplantation and horrors unspeakable.

THESE are but a few of the many super-excellent stories in store for the readers of WEIRD TALES. To make sure of getting your copy each month, and thus avoid the embarrassment of finding your favorite news stand sold out, just fill out the coupon below and let us send it right to your home. That's the safest way.

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(Continued from page 708)

so naturally I'm very eager to read it. Would you kindly put it in your monthly 'reprint' section for the new readers who have missed a very good story?"

One of our authors, in a letter to the editor, gives us some food for thought, and we pass his ideas on to you. "I, for one," he writes, "grow a trifle tired of the results of the seeming compulsion under which so many writers of this type of tale labor to allow the forces of evil almost unlimited modes of self-expression, while restricting the opposite force to the use by the hero of such symbols as a holy relic or sprig of some plant, waved under the nose of the particular devil in the case. Lovecraft and Howard are not obsessed by the notion, but so many are. I wonder if that is not one of the reasons for the superiority of the Lovecraft and Howard yarns? I know I usually get nearly to the end of each de Grandin tale, vowing to myself that here is the best story in the magazine, and then have the fellow flaunt the toenail of a saint or some such thing. Then I hunt for a Howard story. Without casting aspersion on Seabury Quinn or the lesser ones who also suffer that strange compulsion, I wonder whether a little editorializing on your part in the Eyrie might not have a good effect, provided you agree with me in the matter as I am sure many of your readers will."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue of WEIRD TALES? Your first choice in the March issue, as shown by your votes, went to the reprint story, *The Phantom Farmhouse,* by Seabury Quinn. Second and third choices were *The Sea Horror,* by Edmond Hamilton, and *The Rat,* by S. Fowler Wright.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE MAY WEIRD TALES ARE:

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The Scourge of B'Moth

(Continued from page 596)

the car, we drove back to the office of the detective.

When we arrived, we found the secretary in great distress. The police dog that Ellery loved so much appeared to have been taken suddenly ill. The detective excused himself, and left the room.

We heard him outside, calling the dog. There was a patter of canine feet, then a snarling growl. We heard a heavy body thud to the ground, and a cry of pain. Darting to the door, we saw a sight that sickened us.

Ellery lay upon the floor, and blood was streaming from his throat where the infallible instinct of the dog had ripped the life out of him. He was dead before we reached him. And as the dog—half wolf, wholly wild—stood there, with his slavering jaws, growling at us, his face seemed to be transfigured. The diabolical leer, the unspeakable enmity of those eyes, touched with a devilish light, bespoke the fiend, the devourer, Behemoth. Around him there curled a thin wisp of yellow vapor, twisting and turning in a glance of eery glee.

D'Arlancourt picked up Ellery's revolver from the table and fired at the brute. The dog fell dead, and as he fell—was it true, or did my distraught nerves belie my senses?—I thought I heard an ominous rumble from the dark recesses of the room, as the vapor floated out of the window and vanished.

10. The Scourge of B'Moth

IT DID not need the statement of the girl whom we had brought with us to convince us that the day was near when the whole horde of the jungle would attempt to overrun civilization.

The telegrams without exception told of a series of attempts to the same

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end. Several of them in fact employed the word "B'Moth," showing clearly that the incidents were all connected by some strong central purpose.

But we were still in the dark, and ignorant of the time and place of the attempt. The thing was expected to raise its slimy head in Argentina, Africa, India, and a dozen other countries. How could we hope to deal with them all at the same time?

What we did do, however, was to cable to the police forces of the entire world, telling them to watch diligently and be on their guard for any invasion from the jungle or from the sea. Probably our message sounded fantastic to them, but we made it as convincing as possible.

This done, we set about for a means to protect our own people from the menace which we felt was imminent. After some thought, I found a possible means to forestall these hideous things. It was a daring one, and risky; not to be attempted without the full consent of my good friend Dr. Prendergast, of whose whereabouts I was not even sure at this time.

However, I telephoned the hospital, and asked if he was there. I learned that he was, and that the hospital authorities had succeeded in rekindling the fire which a careless attendant had allowed to die some time previously. The doctor was rapidly recovering. I requested the office to connect me with him, and he replied cheerily enough.

He was quite unable to furnish me with any information of the sort that I desired. Finally, I made the proposal that I had in mind. It was the only way that offered even a possible solution of the problem.

"Are you willing to do something for the cause of humanity?" I asked.

"What is it that you want me to do?" he asked rather anxiously. He had already been in dire peril, and I could well believe that he feared the Thing more than anything else in the world.

"I want you to let that fire die out again for a few minutes," I said slowly and distinctly.

"Good heavens! I can't do that. You know what it would mean."

"Yes, I know. And because the matter is so important, I ask you to do this. We will be outside, and ready to light it again, so you will not be powerless."

"Why do you want me to do this?"

"There is a chance that you may be able to tell us when this invasion will occur. If it is to be soon, all the followers of the Master will have to know it. You must try to remember all that occurs while the fire is out. Will you do this?"

"It's a lot—but I'll do it," he said resolutely.

We hurried over to the hospital, and watched through the aperture of the door while Dr. Prendergast allowed the fire to flicker slowly to death. His face grayed with fear as the last sparks died down and the ashes cooled. I could see, even from that distance, the great drops of perspiration breaking out upon his brow, as the insidious influence stole over him. The room darkened, and the tendrils of vapor slowly gathered about him. He lay upon the bed like one dead, but, by his breathing, I could see that he was still alive.

I saw the distorted ferocity that I had come to know so well these last few days spread over his regular features. I heard the grunts that came from him as from some wild animal. He snarled and spat in a very fury of savage lust, as he became metamorphosed from the doctor into the demon. No longer did he lie motionless, but he moved excitedly about, and began to talk in a language meaningless to me. He seemed to be holding a lengthy conversation; but at last he struggled, as though attempting to throw off some fearful oppression, and I knew that it was time to relight the fire. I entered the room, resolutely shunning the dampness that sought to

envelop me with its coils. I soon had a bright fire burning, and slowly the good doctor revived.

"Do you remember anything?" I questioned, anxiously.

"Yes, I remember all. I can scarcely credit it. There will be an invasion from the ocean with the next full moon. Monsters will attempt to blot out the whole civilized world, and the followers of B'Moth are expected to help in the destruction. I myself have been ordered to help."

"You are sure that it is to be with the next full moon?" I interjected earnestly.

"Yes. The next full moon—when is that?"

I consulted the calendar. "It is a week from today," I said. "Have you any idea where the attempt will commence?" I suggested.

"None whatever, but I suppose it will be somewhere in this country," he said dejectedly.

"Well, we will be on our guard everywhere," I said.

D'Arlancourt and I left the hospital, and hurrying to the secret service offices, we again sent several telegrams, and also radio messages to ships at sea. We requested everyone to keep a sharp watch for any accumulation of monsters both at sea and on land.

We spent some days of enforced idleness, and were becoming hopeless of being able to prevent the awful catastrophe that was about to overwhelm us. We had had great difficulty in influencing the war department in the matter, but finally they had consented to order the forts in various parts of the country to fire upon anything extraordinary belonging to the animal world. That was as far as they would go, and the order was given more out of courtesy than anything else. And who can blame them? They were used to fighting armies, and not spirits. But it was the

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order that saved the world, as subsequent events will show.

As the day of full moon approached, the armed forces of a world united for the sake of civilization were mustered and anxious. Then came the message. It was from the steamer *Malolana,* plying between San Francisco and Hawaii. The broadcast that we had sent out a few days earlier had been effective. The captain reported that he had seen a school of monstrous things swimming rapidly toward the mainland, directly upon the steamer routes forming the great circle to Honolulu. There were thousands of them, like enormous blanket-fish, huge beyond comparison, almost as large as his own ship!

During the day, other messages came in from various vessels on the great circle route to Hawaii, and they all mentioned this huge array of Things. The Presidio at San Francisco was immediately notified, and we caught a fast airplane that took us to Chicago, and Denver, and so to Mills Field.

It was the night of the full moon when we arrived at San Francisco. We motored hastily to the Presidio. Activity was everywhere. The enormous disappearing guns that can shoot a shell thirty miles were ready to hurl destruction at the invading hordes from the deep. The scout planes hovered aloft to signal the approach of the invaders. Telescopes were trained anxiously upon the star-lit Pacific. Fort Miley was a scene of activity also. The naval stations at Bremerton and San Diego were watching for any change of course on the part of the hordes from the ocean. And with the full moon, they came! The ocean for miles was a seething, swirling mass of horrid immensity. Green bodies sucked their way through the smooth water. The swish of their swimming was plainly audible to the watchers on the lookouts of the Presidio.

"Fire!" went forth the order, and the range guns belched a message of death. Again and again shells were hurled into the center of the bloated creatures. Still they came on, slowly, relentlessly, ceaselessly.

The air was a deafening hell of shrieks and blasts as the guns did their work. The ocean was red with the blood of the Things. And still they came on!

Mines were exploded outside the Golden Gate—mines placed there to blow up battleships. But still the things came on!

Airplanes dropped bomb after bomb upon the horde, and came back for more ammunition, but still the advance continued! A dense fog that I had learned to dread was enveloping the sea—the breath of Behemoth himself, coming to general his forces!

Time after time the guns spoke. The very hills shook. From Fort Miley there came thunder, too. Battleships anchored in Navy Row steamed to the mouth of the Golden Gate and hurled broadside after broadside at the monsters. They were slowing up now, and their number was greatly reduced, but still the advance was not halted.

At last came frantic word from the coast-guard station at the beach that they were landing. The panic-stricken people were leaving their homes, to see them crushed beneath the weight of the horde like so much matchwood. The guns laid down a concentrated barrage upon the landing-place of the monsters and tore the beach to shreds.

Under the glare of the huge searchlights I saw streams of sluggish red, where the awful carnage went on; but at last they turned back—back to the sea whence they came. The fog lifted—had the Master met his fate?—and the filthy things floundered heavily away from the shore, jostling the carcasses of thousands of their dead as they did so. Still the thunder of the guns followed them, far, far out to sea, to the extreme limit of their range; and when it was all over we

sank limp to the ground, speechless before the peril that had just confronted us.

11. Conclusion

OF COURSE, the details were never made public, but on the following day we received cablegrams from all parts of the world telling of a concerted attempt to regain power by these creatures of a dreadful past.

From India came messages telling of invasions by hordes of tigers and mammoth elephants; from Africa of lions, all the wild life of the forest; from Burma stories of huge apes that crushed the life out of men; from South America, of all the reptilian life of the Amazonian forests massed in relentless array. But thanks to our knowledge of their purpose, the attempts were frustrated.

The stories of incendiarism, of course, could not be kept out of the press. The dynamiting of the McAuliffe Building in New York is common property. The butchery of Professor Atkinson in his laboratory of experimental hygiene is well known. Throughout the civilized world, the police forces were hard put to it to cope with the threatened overthrow of civilization.

But, once again, civilization triumphed, and the forces of destruction were greatly reduced, although not destroyed; they never can be destroyed. But my friend Dr. Prendergast laughs at the fog now, and the rain has no terrors for me.

Was my surmise correct when those things turned tail and made again for the open sea? Is B'Moth dead? I wonder!

Coming Soon—

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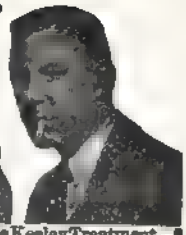

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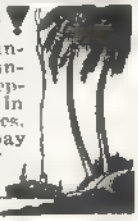

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The Shadow of a Nightmare

(Continued from page 624)

men was collected and carried to a secluded mountain valley, and the only entrance sealed behind them. Guards were placed around the valley, at first, but the years passed, the story became legendary, and the guards were withdrawn for wars and never returned. The legend itself faded in time, and the Country of the Mad far beyond the known ranges lay forgotten.

"But in all the years that the valley had been sealed, the band had survived and increased. At first they found it difficult to exist, for they were all insane and could not unite. But the valley was fertile, and they found it easy to live on the wild fruits and vegetables there, and the various small animals that were in it. They were people of all stages of insanity, and of several races. For a while they were antagonistic to each other, race to race and individual to individual. Their twisted minds could not work together; none could tell what the madness of another might lead him to do. Murder, fighting, plot and counterplot, outbursts that sent them raging up and down the valley were common at first. But years passed by, and the young grew up accustomed to each other's madness. The children were almost invariably insane from birth; normal ones were killed because they were not like the rest. The races themselves intermarried.

"And so, in time, their madness became equalized, their insanity a thing which affected all alike. The Country of the Mad flourished, a nightmare of nightmares. And it flourished, not because of the madmen, but because of what had entered.

"The volume tells no more. What entered, therefore, remains a mystery —but I can guess.

"12. Received a letter from Chelton saying he has acquired an ancient manuscript for me and is forwarding it. He says it is written in a dead Indian tongue. Hope it refers to the Country of the Mad.

"25. The manuscript has arrived, and I am beginning the translation. It is priceless! A chronicle from the valley itself, written by one of the band! It seems to be the key to some rite.

"29. John has left. I may never finish the translation. They are beyond my control already, wild from their enforced absence of nearly ten thousand years. God! I *can't* live without sleep. And I was fool enough to search for the most horrible tale. . . .

"Aug. 1. I have destroyed the manuscript and my translation. If only I had never seen the thing! For I know now what it is that comes to him who has opened the door that they discovered. It is three days since I have closed my eyes; I have not slept since the night. . . . And drugs won't keep me awake longer.

"11 p. m. These may be the last words I shall write. I can hardly keep my eyes open, though I—though I—ho-hum—though I—seem—though I seem to feel them—gathering—insane—that are insane—no shape save the shape of nightmare and horror and rottenness—shapes of corpses and staring skulls—shapes indescribable—shapes—shapes—I *can't* hold out any longer—I *must* sleep—I tell you, I *must*. What if they do come again? I tell you, I've *got* to sleep. Ahhhhhhhhh——

"My God! They're coming—they're crawling up my legs—they're creeping up my face—my eyes—God save me!—and entering my brain!"

Within the Nebula

(Continued from page 618)

do more than merely glimpse us, we had sprung to our feet and were leaping toward the creatures with upraised axes. The next moment we were upon them, our heavy weapons flashing right and left in swift destruction, and when we lowered them only masses of dead flesh lay at our feet. Wildly we looked about, but there seemed no other of the nebula-creatures on all the great pit's floor, nothing but the silent, automatic machines, and the great cylinder of the ray. Now we leapt toward that cylinder, then halted. A half-dozen pseudopod arms were reaching up from the shaft up which we had come, a half-dozen of the creatures pulling themselves up there. It was the pursuit from beneath!

Jor Dahat cried out, raced toward the shaft's mouth with the Arcturian. "Cut the cable, Ker Kal!" he shouted. "The cable that runs into the cylinder—Sar Than and I will hold them in the shaft!"

I saw the two of them reach the shaft's mouth just as a mass of the nebula-creatures were emerging from it, saw their two great axes flash down and send the shapeless beings hurtling down to death. Then I had leapt myself to the great, foot-thick cable of black metal that ran into the cylinder's side, carrying into it the power from all the machines about us which generated the mighty ray. I raised my ax, brought it down with all my force on the cable, but on the hard metal it made only a shallow cut. Again I swung it, and again, with all my force, while at the shaft's mouth I glimpsed the axes of my two friends flashing in the dim light like brands of lightning, falling in swift death upon the shapeless nebula-creatures as they sought to emerge from the shaft. I heard the puff of jets of the deadly blue smoke leaping up-

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ward, but knew that so long as they were held inside the shaft they could not reach the Arcturian and the plant-man with their annihilating jets.

Fiercely I swung my own ax down upon the black metal of the thick cable, in one swift blow after another, severing its twisted strands one after the other. The last minutes were speeding, I knew, and like some soulless automaton I wielded the great ax in blow after blow, scarcely conscious in that mad moment of anything but the thick length of metal below me. I was half through it, now, had cut through half its strands, and knew that another dozen of blows would sever it. And even as hope flamed up in my brain there was a cry from Jor Dahat, I saw a sudden resistless wave of the nebula-creatures pour up from the shaft and force my two companions back toward me, and then they were raising their deadly weapons to send annihilation upon us.

For a single moment the whole scene seemed as motionless as a set tableau. Then with a wild shout I whirled the great ax high above my head, swung it for an instant in a flashing circle, and then brought it down with the last mad remnant of my force upon the half-severed cable below, a powerful blow that clove through its twisted strands as a knife might cut through cords. There was a flash of light as the cable parted, and then the brilliance of the great cylinder's upper surface had snapped out, and the mighty ray that sprang from it had vanished!

The next instant there was utter silence, a thick, terrific silence in which we, and all the nebula-creatures that had crowded up onto the pit's floor, gazed up toward the mighty nebula's fires, far above us. Seconds, minutes, that awful silence reigned, and then I saw the weapons of the nebula-creatures before us dropping from their grasp, saw them rushing wildly about as though in mad, frenzied terror, heard a great cry from Jor Dahat, beside me.

"The nebula!" he cried hoarsely, pointing up toward the glowing fires above. "The nebula—*collapsing!*"

I looked up, dazedly, saw the vast fires moving now, slowly, majestically, gigantically, moving down toward us, toward the nebula world, the whole vast turning nebula collapsing into the great space at its center with the removal of the ray that had whirled it on, its mighty, crowding fires rushing down upon us. Then I had sunk to the floor, felt the arms of my two friends about me, dimly felt myself dragged across the floor through the crazily rushing hordes of nebula-creatures into our cruiser, felt it lifting up out of the great pit with the plant-man at the controls, as the fires above rushed down upon us.

Then there was a thunderous roaring of titanic fires about us, a vast, interminable rushing of colossal currents of flaming gas all around us as we plunged upward through the collapsing nebula. More and more dimly to my ears came that mighty roar of flame as consciousness began to leave me, but at last, through my darkening senses, I felt that it had ceased, that we were humming through space once more. With a last effort I staggered to the window with my two companions, gazed down dazedly toward the terrific ocean of boiling flame that stretched gigantically beneath us, saw that still its fires were drawing together, collapsing, contracting, condensing. Then suddenly up from the collapsing nebula there leapt a single mighty tongue of fire, as from some titanic conflagration, a vast rush of flame that towered up toward the stars, and then dwindled and sank and died.

It was the end forever of the world within the nebula.

6

It was more than two weeks later that with all the thousands of the great Council of Suns we passed out of the mighty tower into the starlit night. They were still shouting, those thousands, for it was but hours before that our battered cruiser had swung down toward the tower out of the void of space, to meet such a reception as never yet had been equaled in this universe. And now that the Council's tumultuous meeting had closed at last, and each of its members made ready to depart for his own sun, the shouting applause about us was redoubled.

At last from out of the darkness a great star-cruiser swept toward us, paused, and then the member from Antares had entered it and it was speeding up into the darkness. Another drew up before us, entered by the strange representative from Rigel, and then it too had vanished and still others were sweeping toward us. Out of the darkness they came, star-cruiser after star-cruiser, and into each went one of the members, flashing out to his own star once more. One by one, we watched them go, watched the great ships lift into the darkness, starting out to Polaris and Fomalhaut and Algol, starting out on long journeys to suns far out at the Galaxy's edge. One by one they went, until at last there remained only we three of all the members, with the three cruisers waiting before us that would carry us back to our own stars.

We paused, then, with a common impulse gazing upward. Across the heavens gleamed the hosts of suns, points of brilliant light in a field of deepest black. Moments we gazed up toward them, and toward three among them that were far distant from each other across the heavens—the magnificent golden splendor of great Capella, to the left, and the fiery red brilliance of Arcturus, to the right, and above us and between them a

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smaller star of deep yellow, that little spark of light toward which the eyes and hearts of men shall turn until the end of time, though they roam the limits of the universe. A moment we gazed up, up toward the three orbs, and then Jor Dahat raised his hand, pointing to another star low above the horizon, a great, soft-glowing one that was like a little ball of misty light.

"Look," he said softly. "The nebula!"

Silently we gazed out toward it for a long moment, a moment in which our thoughts leapt out across the gulf toward the glowing thing at which we gazed, toward that mighty realm of fire where we had struggled for our universe, in the strange world inside it which we three had plunged to its doom. Then, silent still, we gripped hands, and turned toward our waiting cruisers.

Then they, too, were driving up into the darkness, out from Canopus once more into the gulf of space, into the eternal silence of the changeless void, each toward its star.

Le Revenant

By CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

(Translated by Clark Ashton Smith)

Like an ill angel tawny-eyed,
I will return, and stilly glide
With shadows of the lunar dusk
Along thy chamber aired with musk.

And I will give thee, ere I go,
The kisses of a moon of snow,
And long caresses, chill, unsleeping,
Of serpents on the marbles creeping.

When lifts again the bloodless dawn,
From out thy bed I shall be gone—
Where all, till eve, is void and drear:

Let others reign by love and ruth
Over thy life and all thy youth,
But I am fain to rule by fear.

who is the victim? who the murderer?

can *you* solve this mystery in a mystery

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Is it Seaforth?

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Is it Zuilika?

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~but when I started to play the laugh was on them!

"WELL, folks, I guess we'll have to lock up the piano and make faces at ourselves."

Helen Parker's party was starting out more like a funeral than a good time.

"Isn't Betty Knowles coming?" an anxious voice sang out.

"Unfortunately Betty is quite ill tonight and Chet Nichols is late as usual," replied Helen gloomily.

"I know some brand new card tricks," volunteered Harry Walsh.

"Great!" said Helen. "I'll go and find some cards."

While she was gone I quietly stepped up to the piano bench, sat down, and started to fumble with the pedals underneath. Someone spotted me. Then the wise-cracks began.

They Poke Fun at Me

"Ha! Ha! Ted thinks that's a player-piano," chuckled one of the boys.

"This is going to be a real musical comedy," added one of the fair sex.

I was glad I gave them that impression. So I kept fiddling around the pedals—making believe that I was hunting for the foot pumps.

"Come over to my house some night," said Harry. "I've got an electric player and you can play it to your heart's content. And I just bought a couple of new rolls. One is a medley of Victor Herbert's compositions — the other. . ."

Before he had a chance to finish I swung into the strains of the sentimental "Gypsy Love Song." The joking suddenly ceased. It was evident that I had taken them by surprise. What a treat it was to have people listening to me perform. I continued with "Kiss Me Again" and other popular selections of Victor Herbert. Soon I had the crowd singing and dancing and finally they started to bombard me with questions . . . "How? . . . When? . . . Where . . . did you ever learn to play?" came from all sides.

I Taught Myself

Naturally, they didn't believe me when I told them I had learned to play at home and without a teacher. But I laughed myself when I first read about the U. S. School of Music and their unique method for learning music.

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"None at all," I replied. "For the very first thing I did was to send for a Free Demonstration Lesson. When it came and I saw how easy it was to learn without a teacher I sent for the complete course. What pleased me so was the fact that I was playing simple tunes *by note* from the very start. For I found it easy as ABC to follow the clear print and picture instructions that came with each lesson. Now I play several classics by note and most all of the popular music. Believe me there's a real thrill in being able to play a musical instrument."

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